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ERIC F. RUSSELL
AND OTHERS
Plus THE GREAT O. HENRY AWARD FANTASY BY TRUMAN CAPOTE

They Write...

TRUMAN CAPOTE

"I was born in New Orleans in 1925. Before I finally settled down to writing as a full-time profession, I did—as most writers seem to—a variety of work. I wrote political speeches, danced on a river boat, painted flowers on glass, read scripts for a film company, studied fortune-telling with the celebrated Mrs. Acey Jones, worked for the New Yorker, and selected anecdotes for digest magazines."

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

"I'm 46—look like 56—feel like 36. Educated by the late Robert Ingersoll and the late Charles Fort. They boiled away all the abstruse ignorance squirted into me by the British educational system. Dressed in khaki, I followed General Patton through Europe during the last war. Chief hobby: needling my agent. Major ambition: to entertain so many magazine readers so well, someone will have a momentary regret when I'm put down the hole. Minor ambition: to type with more than two fingers."

ROY HUGGINS

"I graduated from a Portland, Oregon, grammar school with the distinction of being voted 'the sloppiest kid in school.' I bummed around for a few years after finishing high school, graduated Phi Beta Kappa from UCLA, and then went into industrial engineering. I sold my first story in 1946, when I was 30, and have been going strong ever since. Right now, I'm directing a motion picture at Columbia Studios."

fantastic

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Illustrator: Paul Lundy

BY JEROME BIXBY

ANGELS IN THE JETS

If, as appears more and more likely, mankind intends to start gadding about the universe, it's high time somebody points out that the dangers of Infinity's frontiers may go far beyond gun-slinging bandits and Indians in war paint. Take, for example, the lushly beautiful planet where Captain Dodge and his space-ship crew landed. Lots of danger in the air; in fact, the air was *danger! Before matters quieted down, the skipper knew one thing for certain: In a world gone mad padded cells are for the sane!*

. . . A native New Yorker, Jerry Bixby, 27 and unmarried, is a seasoned and capable magazine editor. While his fiction output is small, it sells at once and invariably gets anthologized.

IT WAS chemically very similar to Earth, but much smaller. It circled a nameless Class K sun in Messier 13, showing its one Y-shaped continent to the morning every sixteen-odd hours. It had mile-high green flora, hungry fauna, a yellowish-red sky that often rained, grey rivers that wound smoothly to a tossing

grey sea. It had a perfectly breathable atmosphere — except for one thing. Because of that one thing, Captain Murchison G. Dodge had named the planet "Deadly".

Interstellar Investigation Team 411 had been on one of the seacoasts of Deadly for three days when Mabel Guernsey tripped over a huge, half-buried clam-like shell. In falling, she struck her head on the point of a huge conch-like shell. Her oxy-mask was torn off, and Mabel Guernsey got the madness.

They locked her up. They walked her over to the *Lance* that stood like a shining three-hundred-foot trophy on its sloping base of brown-black obsidian, created from sand by landing-blasts. They took her inside and put her in an extra storage compartment, and stacked crates in front of the door, and put a twenty-four-hour guard on duty to see that she didn't get away. For it became swiftly apparent that the one thing in the world — or, rather, on Deadly — that Mabel wanted to do, wanted most terribly to do, was to take off everybody else's mask so that they would all be like her.

Murchison Dodge, who was the *Lance's* physiologist-biologist as well as its captain, went off searching the surrounding ecology for some cure for the malady, which was in many ways similar to ergot poisoning. Like ergot, the condition was caused by the sclerotium of a fungus — airborne and inhaled, in this case, as a curious microscopic unit which Murchison Dodge thought of as a sclerotioid spore. Like ergot, it brought itching and twitching and numbness at extremities; but these were short-lived symptoms, and there was no ergot-like effect upon the involuntary muscles, so the victims didn't die. They only went mad, and stayed mad. From Mabel Guernsey's behavior, Rupert, the psychologist, judged it to be an especially manic form of insanity. Mabel seemed very happy. She wished they could all be as happy as she. She was still trying to grab off oxy-masks when they closed the door on her.

So Dodge went searching for an antidote. He was gone for two days. And while he was gone, the night guard at Mabel's storage-room prison — a spacehand named Kraus, whom nobody liked, and who found himself stimulated by the proximity of a fairly attractive and provocatively irresponsible woman — pushed aside the crates, opened the door, and went in to do some tax-free tomcatting.

When Dodge returned, in the little one-man crewboat, the *Lance* was gone.

Far below, a patch of bright color — red, blue, yellow, purple, with the tiniest glimmer of steel to one side — told Dodge that he

had at last found his wayward spaceship.

So they hadn't gone interstellar, thank God, or suicidally run the *Lance* into the local sun. That had been his first terrified thought upon finding the note they'd left and realizing what must have happened.

The note had been formed by large shells in the sand. It had been a hundred feet long. It had said: *YOU'RE CRAZY. WE'RE GOING. YOU'LL NEVER FIND US.*

And beneath, in smaller shells carefully selected for size and color, the names of the sixty-three spacehands and Team-members of the *Lance.*

Dodge sighed and cut the jets. He pulled the crewboat up into a stall. Its airfoils whined in atmosphere that was like Earth's, but almost twice as heavy. The green horizon of Deadly slid smoothly from the round noseport, to be replaced by copper sky and yellow clouds and a hazy orange glow that was the sun, and at the moment of immotion Dodge released the chute. It whipped out, obscuring sky, clouds, sun. It billowed and boomed open. Dodge's couch and its empty companion pistoned back deeply at the jar, slowly rose. Dodge half-sat, half-lay, his weight on his shoulders, looking straight up into the stiff white underside of the chute with eyes that were feathered with red and burning under dry lids. His hand went out to the button that would right the couch, but he pulled it back. The lying-down position was too comfortable after eighty foodless and sleepless hours at the controls.

The little boat drifted down, swaying on its lines, the apex of each swing allowing him a view around the edge of the chute. Copper sky. Yellow clouds. Hazy sun.

Back and forth, back and forth; and suddenly glimpses of green replaced glimpses of copper and yellow; the crewboat was among the giant trees. Each swing now revealed a wall of green and brown sliding evenly, silently, up past the port. Behind Dodge the cyclo-drive hummed *mezzo piano*, out of circuit; Dodge's hand rested on the board, ready to drop the boat on its jets should the chute tangle or be torn.

He started the gyro, and the swinging stopped.

He switched on the rear-vision screen. He blinked in astonishment at what he saw, down among the giant roots of giant trees, though he had been prepared for just about anything. He commenced to push buttons that controlled slip-strings. The boat's downward course altered, drifting left toward the clearing in the forest.

A last-moment adjustment brought it to rest on its fins in the

center of a village square.

Wearily, he heeled the pedal that would draw the chute back into its cubby, automatically repacking it as it came. Then he turned on the side-view screens, one after another, leaving them on to get a panorama.

They were all grouped around in a wide circle, looking up at the boat. They were smiling. They were carrying guns. Even little Jansen, the bacteriologist, who had often professed a hatred of guns, had a brace of handblasts on his pudgy hips. There had been dangerous animals howling along the seacoast; Dodge supposed there must be just as many back here in Deadly's vast forests. So the guns argued that the madmen were at least able to recognize that menace, and were ready to fight it for their lives.

The glimmer of steel to one side of the colors was no longer tiny; it was huge and high — and not complete. The proud *Lance* had been partially stripped of her skin. There were ragged, gaping holes the length of her, with skeletal framework showing through, where great curving plates had been removed. Most of them cut out, Dodge saw dully, with torches. The *Lance* would never leave Deadly.

And the bright colors themselves . . .

Dodge felt a cold prickling back of his ears. The colors were giant fifteen-by-fifteen pine crates from the *Lance's* hold, a dozen or so of them, and the tarnished plates from the *Lance's* hull along with some shining new ones from her repair stock — all broken-down, sawed-up, bent, buckled, leaned-together, bolted, welded, nailed, glued, painted and arranged in a mad travesty of a village.

Holes — windows and doors — had been sawn or battered in the crates; and judging by the array of bolts and stays visible on their outsides, some had two storeys. They sat on the thick green grass like giant children's blocks thrown helter-skelter on a lawn. All colors and crazy angles; frills and frippery; scallops and gingerbread, ju-jubes and toyland, polka-dots and peppermint stripes and bright checked patterns like gingham. Raggedy curtains in the windows, moving with the breeze, and a doormat, formerly a seat cushion in the *Lance's* main lounge, with WELCOME in drying orange. The walls of one crate-house were covered with purple and green and yellow murals whose jumbled, whirling ugliness could have meaning only to their mad creator.

The paint, Dodge thought, must be the petrolatum vehicle for the *Lance's* fuel, pigmented with vivid clays which abounded on Deadly. It was splotchy, and most of it had run badly.

A little grey stream ran through

the clearing — Dodge had found the *Lance* by following waterways methodically up and down the continent — and several slapdash garden plots were already under way. Beyond, at the edge of the clearing, was the heavy glass and metal heap of machinery that had been in the crates.

Dodge turned the gyro off, but left the slower-starting cyclodrive on as precaution; he might want to get away in a hurry. His trembling, dirty hands found another control. The couch turned slowly vertical; the straps that had held him tight demagnetized, retreated into slots. He got up, swaying a moment on the spider platform beneath the couch, took a deep breath that had acrid jet-odor in it. Then he stepped over to the shaft, found the ladder with his feet. He descended to the airlock.

Through the transparent port he could look down fifteen feet to the ground and see them staring up at him. . . .

Jansen, Goldberg, Chabot, de Silva, Mabel Guernsey, young Jones, Marian — his heart ached as he saw Marian's face in the crowd, lovely as ever and smiling vapidly — Strickland, the four wide-eyed children, all the others. Standing in a wide circle whose center was the boat, and whose radius was the sharp-nosed shadow of the boat. Some presentably clothed, others incongruously clothed — like de Silva, who wore women's silk stockings and bathing trunks beneath the dress coat he'd affected for social gatherings aboard ship — and many not clothed at all. Dodge saw old, dignified Rupert, who had evidently not elected to come watch the crewboat; Rupert stood nude some distance off in front of a crate-house, facing away from crowd and crewboat, posing motionless with wrists crossed over his head and back arched. There was a puddle at his feet. Rupert was being a fountain.

Dodge worked the airlock mechanism, let the lock open a few inches, stopped it there; he had little assurance that they wouldn't blow his head off if they got the chance. First, of course, he put on his oxy-mask.

Looking out through the partly-open lock, his voice nasal through the mask, he said, "You poor, poor devils."

"It's Dodge, all right," said Chabot, the *Lance's* Chief Engineer. He stood on the grass with his head just out of the shadow the boat cast, his body in it.

"It's God!" cried Mabel Guernsey, and prostrated herself. Several others did likewise.

"It is not!" said Chabot scornfully over his shoulder. "It's only the captain!"

Dodge looked at Marian. She had moved to the fore of the crowd where he could see her fully.

She wore a halter affair, probably because her breasts had begun to sunburn, and nothing else except the Mercury-diamond engagement ring Dodge had given her. It glinted in the saffron sunlight as she stirred. She was looking, eyes sleepy, at his masked face in the airlock. He wondered bleakly if she even knew who he was. Her hair, unlike the matted dirty mops of several of the other women, appeared well tended; but her body was filthy, streaked with perspiration. Marian had always taken pride in her hair.

Dodge lowered his gaze to the sparkling black eyes of Chabot, who had come forward from the crowd and stood directly beneath the airlock. The man, Dodge remembered, had been a bit of a glad-hander aboard ship, always organizing and taking command of trivial activities; it was likely that this bent had led him to a kind of *pro tem* mayoralty here, for he seemed to be without dispute the spokesman. Dodge began searching for something useful to say.

Mabel Guernsey lifted her face from the grass and peeped up at Dodge. Then she got to her feet, apparently having lost her awe of God. She began to walk around the boat, within the circle of the crowd, staring up at the sleek metal sides. Several of the children followed her, singing nonsense in small piping voices.

Dodge decided that formality might be best. He put his captain's crispness into his voice. "You remember me, then, Chabot?"

"Sure, I remember you," said Chabot, smiling up. His hair was curly and as black as his eyes, with large flakes of dandruff in it. "You're crazy. You're crazy as a coot! You were going to try to make us crazy too!"

Dodge made his eyes icy, trying to frown Chabot down; then he remembered he was wearing a mask, and it didn't show. The frown remained, as he again tried to think of something to say.

"I got loose," Mabel Guernsey said, moving in her inspection of the boat. "Kraus came in, and I ran out, and he chased me. I opened the main airlock and ran outside. Kraus didn't try to close the airlock, he just stood there. Everybody else was asleep with their masks off. They all woke up happy, like Kraus and me."

"And then we went away," Chabot said, "before you came back. We hoped you wouldn't find us. We were sorry, but after all you're crazy, you know.

"Now you can't come out," he added, still smiling, "unless you take off your mask too. We'll kill you if you do!"

Every gun in the crowd came to bear on the airlock.

Dodge moved back behind the airlock door where he could watch

them through the metaglass port. The port would stop a blaster bolt long enough to permit him to throw himself back out of sight if any shooting actually started.

So they'd made plans to deal with the event of his arrival. They were on the defensive. This would have been the most frustrating moment of all, had Dodge actually been able to find the madness-remedy he had searched for. But he hadn't, of course. It might take months of research and experimentation to produce one.

He couldn't help them. He couldn't help himself.

So here he was.

And there they were.

He was hungry. He hadn't eaten since starting back for the *Lance* after hopelessly concluding his search — almost four days ago. When he'd left the *Lance* the crew-boat had had its regular stock of food for two days, no more. Now his stomach was twisting into itself with hunger. And he was tired. God, so tired.

He looked out at the upturned faces, at the tall ruined *Lance* that would never leave this world, and thought that he must be one of the loneliest men in the Universe.

"In fact," said Chabot loudly, "you'd better take off your mask and come out right away. Take off your mask and come out, or we'll push over the boat and come in and get you!"

He stood, smiling and waiting. Looking at him, Dodge thought that the madmen must be eating, at any rate; Chabot still had his waistline. He hoped, with a sudden chill, that they weren't eating each other.

Behind Chabot, Marian turned away, moving with the grace that had always stirred Dodge so. She walked over and stared at Rupert, who was still being a fountain. He stared back, his iron brows crawling up. She pushed him over. She lay down beside him. . . .

Dodge closed his eyes. Marian, and old Rupert. . . . So the woman's passion he had so often sensed in her had at last, but too soon, found its release. Slow, black moments passed. At last he forced himself to open his eyes and felt a dull, sour relief. Rupert, it appeared, was a little overage. He was back being a fountain, and Marian was sitting up, staring at the boat again.

The feeling of relief went away, as if it knew it was ridiculous, leaving only a black hole in his mind, and sick futility, and a small, feverish voice chattering that this was good tragicomedy. He leaned tiredly against the air-lock door. Behind the mask his face felt hot, was suddenly running perspiration. He found himself trembling violently, tight and clotted inside, his clenched fist pressed hard against the mask,

cutting its bit into his lips, and his face was running tears too.

"We'll give you three," said Chabot. "On-n-n-ne . . ."

Dodge could taste blood in his mouth.

The others took it up like a chant, all smiling, surging forward: "Two-o-o-o . . ."

Dodge sagged against the airlock and cried like a baby.

"*Three!*" Explosive, like "*Three!*" always is.

They milled around the boat with Chabot, by furious shouting finally succeeding in getting the effort organized. They shoved and the boat rocked on its fins.

Wildly Dodge went up the ladder. He sprawled across the twin couches to slap the gyro control. The gyro whined into action and the rocking stopped abruptly. He heard laughter from outside. He went back down the ladder to the airlock, in time to stamp on dirty fingers that clutched the very rim of the lock trying for a solid grasp. The man fell back, hooting. Looking down through the transparent port, Dodge saw that it had been de Silva, boosted on the shoulders of several others.

De Silva lay on the grass and grinned up at him. "Damn you, Cap, I think you broke my hand."

A woman — Susan May Larkin, Nobel physicist — came around the corner of one of the houses. She didn't walk; she hopped. She had a bouquet of alien flowers in one hand and her face was buried in them, and she hopped. Both feet together — crouch — hop! Both feet together — crouch — hop! A big bearlike man, one of the jetmen, came around the corner after her, grinning. He took her roughly by the arm and led her back out of sight. Still she hopped.

Sounds — a soft tinny clatter that could only be pots and pans and other kitchenware from the *Lance's* galley, beaten upon and together — came from the darkness beyond a rough-hewn, curtained window nearby. A certain periodicity of pitch-change suggested that it was music. Across the village, out of sight behind the crewboat, a female voice began to *la-la-la* tunelessly, loudly, in the very uppermost register. The singing children stopped singing to listen.

Dodge said sharply, "Chabot, come up here."

Chabot shook his head. "And have you make me crazy? Uh-uh!"

"I don't want to make you crazy," Dodge said patiently. "Remember, Chabot, I'm still captain of the *Lance*. Come on up. I just want to . . ."

And his voice trailed off, with no place to go. Just wanted to what? He had no cure for the madness. Chabot down there thought he had and was afraid — but he had none. Use Chabot as hostage, then? Why? On threat of

Cartoon: Mendoza

"But mommy, there *is* something under the bed."

the man's death, he might force them to bring food to him. But even then the oxygen supply in the tank at his belt and in the boat's tank wouldn't last forever. Or even for another week. And they quite possibly might abandon Chabot or simply forget him, and Dodge's threats would not avail. And Chabot wasn't going to come up in the first place.

What *could* he do?

"All right," he said. "Stay there."

"I intend to," Chabot smiled.

So seemingly rational, thought Dodge. So well-spoken and logical within their framework of lunatic action.

Deadly's swift rotation had moved the point of the crewboat's shadow along the perimeter of the circle-standing crowd, like a giant hand on a giant clock, marking off alien minutes on smiling, mad-eyed numerals.

His mind rebelled with sudden, almost physical impact. He must do something. Not anything constructive, anything aimed at brightening his incredible position, for there was absolutely nothing of that sort to be done. Just something, something. His mind screamed for action.

"I'm going to shoot," he said in a dead voice, "your damned silly village to pieces. With this boat's proton-buster."

"Oh, no, you're not," said Chabot. "We were talking about that." Without turning, he said curtly, "Jones —"

Ned Jones, steward and cook's apprentice, ran forward from the crowd. Lithe, slim, young, he sprang to the broad leading edge of the crewboat's right stabilizer. Poised there, he got a foothold on the radar blister a little higher up. Then, one foot braced on the blister, leaning forward a little against the sleek side of the boat, he leaped a short two feet upward, bringing his head about level with the large oval barrel of the proton-cannon. He would have fallen back, then — but he speared one arm into the cannon's muzzle. His body sagged. The muzzle moved an inch downward on its bearings, stopped. The arm broke audibly. Jones dangled, laughing with pain.

"You see," said Chabot. "You're not going to do any blasting, Dodge."

Not so rational after all, thought Dodge. No, I'm not going to do any blasting. But not because that boy's being where he is would stop the charge. He'd just vanish — or at least his arm would — if I triggered. But I'm not going to shoot, because I couldn't do that to him. And because there just isn't any reason to shoot and destroy. Nothing but a crying, tearing, clawing need to do *something*.

But what *could* he do?

So here he was.

And there they were.

Big lonely world, thought Dodge, and my oxygen won't last forever.

Marian was at the edge of the crowd again, staring up at the boat and at Dodge. Her halter had come off — he saw it back on the grass — and she was standing straight and tall and sunburned. She'd always been proud of her carriage, too.

The madness, Dodge thought, was like most others; it impaired value judgements, but not so much any logic built on the shaky basis resulting. Each person afflicted — Chabot, Marian, Rupert whose evident desire to be a fountain might signify a great deal, gun-shy Jansen whose wearing two handblasts might mean as much, de Silva, with his silk stockings — each had become a caricature of himself. The floodgates were down, Dodge thought, and they were living out their unconsciouses, and so they were happy.

He still felt that he had to do something. A man should be able to *act*.

"I'm taking off," he said loudly to the upturned faces. "Stand back. The jets will burn you if you don't."

Chabot didn't move. He laughed. "You're not going anywhere either. If you try to take off the boat will explode and you'll die." He stood there, hands on his hips. "Because we put angels in the jets."

He laughed again, at the look he thought he saw on Dodge's oxy-mask. The laughter caught and ran through the crowd.

Marian spoke for the first time.

"Angels in the jets," she echoed queerly.

And Dodge remembered Marian's knack with a pencil, her certain skill in doodling.

Angels. Always angels. Little chubby, winged angels — almost cherubs.

He watched her as, with that lithe walk and an expression of intense interest, she came forward to pass Chabot and vanish under the stern of the boat. Then he heard her crooning. She sees the angels, he thought. So the madness included a powerful susceptibility to suggestion.

He looked up. Copper sky, yellow clouds. Giant trees, and a village. And he, almost cowering here in the crewboat — to the villagers, possibly, a kind of village idiot. Big lonely world.

Take off? To go where on this big lonely world? And why?

He couched by the partly-open airlock, knees bent, fingertips touching the cold steel. There was a wariness in him, like a beast's. Behind him the gyro's whine, the cyclodrive's hum, were suddenly the song of death.

What did a man live for? All

(Continued on page 160)

Illustrator: Emsh

I'M LOOKING FOR "Jeff"

by FRITZ LEIBER

Years ago, murder in fiction was done by gentle people and was solved when the Inspector learned that Aunt Fanny's lorgnette lay twelve degrees east of the old sundial. Then one day an author came along and took murder out of the rose garden — and the detective story was popular again.

The same goes for horror tales. Where once ghosts haunted baronial halls and got all tangled up in the cobwebs on Lord Poopdeck's armor, they now hang around the neighborhood candy store and the corner saloon. Horror in familiar surroundings is far more effective, we think; for nothing could be quite so blood-curdling as a familiar familiar!

At six-thirty that afternoon, Martin Bellows was sitting at the bar of the Tomtoms. In front of him was a tall glass of beer and behind the bar were two men in white aprons. The two men, one of them so old he was past caring about it, were discussing a matter — and while Martin wasn't really listening, much of the discussion seemed to be for his entertainment.

"If that girl comes in again I won't serve her. And if she starts to get funny I'll give her some real eye-shadow!"

"Regular fire eater, aren't you, Pops?"

"All this week, ever since she started to come in here, there's been trouble."

"Listen to him, will you? Aw, Pops, there's always trouble at a bar. Either somebody makes a play for somebody's girl, or else it's two life-long buddies — "

"I mean nasty trouble. What about those two girls Monday night? What about what the big guy did to Jack? What about Jake

and Janice picking the Tomtoms to break up, and the way they did it? *She* was behind it every time. What about the broken glass in the cracked ice?"

"Shut up! Pops is nuts, friend. He gets wild ideas."

Martin Bellows looked up from his beer at Sol, the young working owner of the Tomtoms, and at the other man behind the bar. Then he glanced down the empty stretch of polished mahogany and over his shoulder at the dim, silent stretches of the booths, where the lights from behind the bar hardly picked up the silver and gilt. He grimaced faintly.

"Anything for a little life."

"Life!" Pops snorted. "That isn't what she'd give you, Mister."

There's no lonelier place in the world than a nightspot in the early hours of evening. It makes one think of all the guys who are alone — without a girl or a friend — restlessly searching. Its noiseless gloom is a sounding board for the faintest fears and aches of the heart. Its atmosphere, used to being pushed around by the loud mouths of happy drunks, is stagnant. The dark corners that should be filled with laughter and desire are ghostly. The bandstand, with the empty chairs sitting around in lifelike positions.

Martin felt it and hitched his stool an inch closer to the old man and the anxious, sharp-eyed Sol.

"Tell me about her, Pops," he said to the old man. "No, let him, Sol."

"All right, but I'm warning you it's a pipe dream."

Pops ignored his boss's remark. He spun the glass he was polishing in a slower rhythm. His face, puffed by beer and thumbed into odd hills and gullies by a lifetime of evanescent but illuminating experiences, grew thoughtful. Outside, traffic moaned and a distant train hooted. Pops pressed his lips together, bringing out a new set of hummocks in his cheeks.

"Name's Bobby," he began abruptly. "Blonde. About twenty. Always orders brandies. Smooth, kid face, except for the faintest scar that goes all the way across it. Black dress that splits down to her belly-button."

A car slammed to a stop outside. The three men looked up. But after a moment they heard the car go on.

"Never set eyes on her till last Sunday night," Pops continued. "Says she's from Michigan City. Always asking for a guy named Jeff. Always waiting to start her particular kind of hell."

"Who's this Jeff?" Martin asked.

Pops shrugged.

"And what's her particular kind of hell?"

Pops shrugged again, this time in Sol's direction. "He don't believe in her," he said gruffly.

"I'd like to meet her, Pops," Martin said smilingly. "Like some excitement. Beginning to feel a big evening coming on. And Bobby sounds like my kind of girl."

"I wouldn't introduce her to my last year's best friend!"

Sol laughed lightly but conclusively. He leaned across the bar, confidentially, glancing back at the older man with secretive humor. He touched Martin's sleeve. "You've heard Pops' big story. Now get this: I've never been able to notice this girl, and I'm always here until I close. So far as I know, nobody's ever been able to notice her except Pops. I think she's just one of his pipe dreams. You know, the guy's a little weak in the head." He leaned a bit closer and spoke in a loud and mocking stage-whisper. "*Used weed when he was a boy.*"

Pops' face grew a bit red, and the new set of hummocks stood out more sharply. "All right, Mr. Wise," he said. "I got something for you."

He put the glass down in the shining ranks, hung up the towel, fished a cigar box from under the bar.

"Last night she forgot her lighter," he explained. "It's covered with a dull, shiny black stuff, same as her dress. Look!"

The other two men leaned forward, but when Pops flipped up the cover there was nothing inside but the white paper lining.

Sol looked around at Martin with a slow grin. "You see?"

Pops swore and ripped out the lining. "One of the band must have swiped it!"

Sol laid his hand gently on the older man's arm. "Our musicians are nice, honest boys, Pops."

"But I tell you I put it there last thing last night."

"No, Pops, you just thought you did." He turned to Martin. "Not that strange things don't sometimes happen in bars. Why, just these last few days —"

A door slammed. The three men looked around. But it must have been a car outside, for nothing came in.

"Just these last few days," Sol repeated, "I've been noticing the damndest thing."

"What?" Martin asked.

Sol shot another of his secretively humorous glances toward Pops. "I'd like to tell you," he explained to Martin, "but I can't in front of Pops. He gets ideas."

Martin got off his stool, grinning. "I got to go anyhow. I'll see you later."

Not five minutes later, Pops smelled the perfume. A rotten, sickly smell. And his ears caught the mouse-faint creaking of the midmost barstool, and the tiny, ghostly sigh. And the awful feel of it went deep down inside him and grated on his bones like chalk. He began to tremble.

Then the creaking and the sigh came again through the gloom of the Tomtoms, a little impatiently, and he had to turn, although it was the last thing he wanted to do, and he had to look at the emptiness of the bar. And there, at the midmost stool, he saw it.

It was terribly indistinct, just a shadowy image superimposed on the silvers and gilts and midnight blues of the far wall, but he knew every part of it. The gleaming blackness of the dress, like the sheerest black silk stocking held up in near darkness. The pale gold of the hair, like motes in the beam of an amber spotlight. The paleness of face and hands, like puffs of powder floating up from a spilled compact. The eyes, like two tiny dark moths, hovering.

"What's the matter, Pops?" Sol asked sharply.

He didn't hear the question. Although he'd have given anything not to have to do it, he was edging shakily down the bar, hand grasping the inner margin for support, until he stood before the midmost stool.

Then he heard it, the faint clear voice that seemed to ride a mosquito's whine, as they say the human voice rides a radio wave. The voice that knifed deep, deep into his head.

"Been talking about me, Pops?"

He just trembled.

"Seen Jeff tonight, Pops?"

He shook his head.

"What's the matter, Pops? What if I'm dead and rotting? Don't shake so, Pops, you've got the wrong build for a shimmy dancer. You should be complimented I show myself to you. You know, Pops, at heart every woman's a stripper. But most of them just show themselves to the guy they like, or need. I'm that way. I don't show myself to the bums. And now give me a drink."

His trembling only increased.

The twin moths veered toward him. "Got polio, Pops?"

In a spasm of haste he jerked around, stooping. By blind fumbling he found the brandy bottle under the ranked glasses, poured a shaky shot, set it down on the bar and stepped back.

"What the hell are you up to!"

He didn't even hear the angry question, or realize that Sol was moving toward him. Instead, he stood pressed back as far as he could, and watched the powder-cloud fingers wind around the shot glass like tendrils of smoke, and heard the bat-shrill voice laugh ruefully and say, "Can't manage it that way, haven't got strength enough yet," and watched the twin moths, and something red and white-edged just below them, dip toward the brandy.

Then for a moment a feeling reached out and touched Sol, for though no hand was on the bar, the shot glass shook, and a little rill of brandy snaked down its

side and pooled on the mahogany.

"What the . . ." Sol began, and then finished, "Those damn trucks, they shake the whole neighborhood."

And all the while Pops was listening to the bat-shrill voice: "That helped, Pops," and then, with a wheedling restlessness, "What's on tonight, Pops? Where can a girl get herself some fun? Who was the tall, dark and handsome that left a while ago? You called him Martin?"

Sol, finally fed up, came striding toward Pops. "And now you'll please explain just what the —"

"Wait!" Pops hand snapped out and clamped on Sol's arm so that the younger man winced. "She's getting up," he gasped. "She's going after him. We got to warn him."

Sol's sharp gaze quickly flashed where Pops was looking. Then, with a little snarl, he shook off Pops' hand and gripped him in turn. "Look here, Pops, are you really smoking weed?"

The older man struggled to free himself. "We got to warn him, I tell you, before she drinks herself strong enough to make him notice her, and starts putting her broken-bottle ideas into his head."

"Pops!" The shout in the ear stiffened the older man, so that he stood there quietly, though rigid, while Sol said, "They probably have some nut bars out on West Madison Street they don't mind having nuts behind. Probably. I don't know. But you're going to have to start looking for one of them if you pull any more of these goofy acts, or start talking about any Bobby and broken glass." His fingers kneaded the old man's biceps. "Get it?"

Pops' eyes were still wild. But he nodded twice, stiffly.

The evening started out feeling heavy and indigestible for Martin Bellows, but after a while it began to float like the diamond-dusted clouds of light around the street lamps. The session with Pops and Sol had given him a funny sort of edge, but he rode out the mood, drifting from tavern to tavern, occasionally treating a decent-looking guy to a drink and letting himself be treated in turn, sharing that courtesy silently, not talking very much, kidding a bit with the girls behind the bars while he covertly eyed the ones in front. After about five taverns and eight drinks he found he'd picked up one of them.

She was a small willowy girl with hair like a winter sunrise and a sleekly-fitting black dress, high-necked but occasionally revealing a narrow ribbon of sweet flesh. Her eyes were dark and friendly, and not exactly law-abiding, and her face had the smooth, matte quality of pale doeskin. He was aware of a faint gardenia perfume.

He put his arm around her and kissed her lightly, under the street lamp, not closing his eyes, and as he did so he noticed that her face had a blemish. The tiniest line of paler flesh, like a single strand of spiderweb, began at her left temple and went straight across the lids of her left eye and the bridge of her nose and back across the right cheek. It enhanced her beauty, he thought.

"Where'll we go?" he asked.

"How about the Tomtoms?"

"A little too early." Then, "Say! Your name is Bobby. That's the name Pops . . . I'll bet you're . . ."

She shrugged. "Pops likes to talk."

"Sure you are! Pops was spieling about you at a great rate." He smiled at her fondly. "Claims you're an evil influence."

"Yes?"

"But don't worry about that. Pops is stark, raving nuts. Why, only this evening —"

"Well, let's go some place else," she interrupted. "I need a drink, lover."

And they were off, Martin with his heart singing, because what you always look for and never find had actually happened to him: he had found a girl that set his imagination and his thirst aflame. Every minute made him more desirous and prouder of her. Bobby was the perfect girl, he decided. She didn't get loud, or quarrelsome, or complaining, or soul-baring, or full of supposedly cute, deliberately exasperating whims. Instead, she was gay and smooth and beautiful, fitting his mood like a glove, yet with that hint of danger and savagery that can never be divorced from the dizzy fumes of alcohol and the dark streets of cities. He found himself growing very foolish about her. He even came to dote on her spiderlike scar, as if it were an expert repair job done on an expensive French doll.

They went to three or four delightful taverns, one where a gray-haired woman sang meltingly, one that showed silent comedies on a small screen instead of television, one full of framed pencil portraits of unknown, unimportant people. Martin got through all the early stages of intoxication — the eager, the uneasy, the dreamily blissful — and emerged safely into that crystal world where time almost stands still, where nothing is surer than your movements and nothing realer than your feelings, where the tight shell of personality is shattered and even dark walls and smoky sky and gray cement underfoot are sentient parts of you.

But after a while he kissed Bobby again, in the street, holding her longer and closer this time, plunging his lips to her neck, drowning in the autumn-garden sweetness of gardenia perfume,

murmuring unsteadily, "You've got a place around here?"

"Yes."

"Well . . ."

"Not now, lover," she breathed. "First let's go to the Tomtoms."

He nodded and drew a bit back from her, not angrily.

"Who's Jeff?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Do you want to know?"

"Yes."

"Look, lover," she said softly, "I don't think you'll ever meet Jeff. But if you do, I want you to promise me one thing — I won't ever ask for anything else." She paused, and all the latent savagery glowed in the pale mask of her features. "I want you to promise me that you'll break the bottom off a beer bottle and jam it into his fat face."

"What'd he do to you?"

The pale mask was enigmatic. "Something much worse than you're thinking," she told him.

Looking down at Bobby's still, expectant face, Martin felt a thrill of murderous excitement go through him.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Promise," he said huskily.

Sol was content only during the busy hours when life ran high in the Tomtoms. Lovers for an evening or forever, touching knees under the tables, meant money in the register.

Sol and Pops had had a busy two hours, but now there was a lull between jazz sessions and Sol had time to chew the rag a bit with a burly and interesting-looking stranger.

"Talk about funny things, friend, here's one for you," he said, leaning across the bar with

a confidential smile. "See that stool second on your left? Every night this week, after one a.m., nobody sits on it."

"It's empty now," the burly man told him.

"Sure, and the one next you. But I'm talking about after one a.m. — that's a couple of minutes yet — when our business hits its peak. No matter how big the crowd is — they could be standing two deep other places — nobody ever occupies that one stool. Why? I don't know. Maybe it's just chance. Maybe there's something funny I haven't figured out yet makes them sheer off from it."

"Just chance," the burly man opined stolidly. He had a fighter's jaw and a hooded gaze.

Sol smiled. Across the room the musicians were climbing back onto the bandstand, leisurely settling themselves. "Maybe, friend. But I got a feeling it's something else. Maybe something very obvious, like that it's got a leg that's a teensy bit loose. But I'm willing to bet it'll stay empty tonight. You watch. Six nights in a row is too good for just chance. And I'd swear on a stack of Bibles it's been empty six nights straight."

"That just ain't so, Sol."

Sol turned. Pops was standing behind him, eyes scared and angry like they'd been earlier, lips working a little.

"What do you mean, Pops?" Sol asked him, trying not to show irritation in front of his new customer.

Pops walked off muttering.

"Got to see that the girls are taking care of the tables," Sol excused himself to the burly man and went after Pops. When he caught up with him he said in an undertone, not looking at him, "Damn it, Pops, are you just trying to make yourself unpleasant?" Across the room the bandleader stood up and smiled around at his boys. "If you think I'm going to take that kind of stuff from you, you're crazy."

"But, Sol," Pops' voice was quavery now, almost as if he were looking for protection, "there ain't ever been an empty place at the bar after one a.m. this week. And as for that particular stool —"

The humorous trumpet-bray opening the first number, spraying a ridicule of all pomp and circumstance across every square inch of the Tomtoms, cut him short.

"Yes?" Sol prompted.

But now Pops was no longer aware of him. It was one a.m. and across the smoky distance of the Tomtoms he was watching her come, materializing from the gloom of the entry, no longer a thing of smoke but strong with the night and the night's secret powers, solidly blocking off the first booths and the green of the dice-table as she passed them.

He noted without surprise or

regret that she'd caught the nice boy she'd gone after, as she caught everything she went after. And now nearer and nearer — the towel dropped from Pops' fingers — past the bandstand, past the short, chromium-fenced stretch of bar where the girls got the drinks for the tables, until she spun herself up onto the midmost barstool and smiled cruelly at him. "'Lo, Pops."

The nice boy sat down next to her and said, "Two brandies, Pops. Soda chasers." Then he took out a pack of cigarettes, began to battle through his pockets for matches.

She touched his arm. "Get me my lighter, Pops," she said.

Pops shook.

She leaned forward a little. The smile left her face. "I said get me my lighter, Pops."

He ducked like a man being shot at. His numb hands found the cigar box under the bar. There was something small and black inside. He grabbed it up as if it were a spider and thrust it down blindly on the bar, jerked back his hand. Bobby picked it up and flicked her thumb and lifted a small yellow flame to the nice boy's cigarette. The nice boy smiled at her lovingly and then asked, "Hey, Pops, what about our drinks?"

For Martin, the crystal world was getting to be something of a china shop. Stronger and stronger, slowly and pleasurably working toward a climax like the jazz, he could feel the urge toward wild and happy action. Masculine action, straight-armed, knife-edged, dramatic, destroying or loving half to death everything around him. Waiting for the inevitable — whatever it was would be — he almost gloated.

The old man half spilled their drinks, he was in such a hurry setting them down. Pops really did seem a bit nuts, just like Sol had said, and Martin stopped the remark he'd half intended to make about finding Pops' girl. Instead, he looked at Bobby.

"You drink mine, lover," she said, leaning close to be heard over the loud music, and again he saw the scar. "I've had enough."

Martin didn't mind. The double brandy burned icily along his nerves, building higher the cool flame of savagery that was fanned by the band blaring derision at the haughty heads and high towers of civilization.

A burly man, who was taking up a little too much room beside Martin, caught Sol's attention as the latter passed inside the bar, and said, "So far you're winning. It's still empty." Sol nodded, smiled, and whispered some witticism. The burly man laughed, and in appreciation said a dirty word.

Martin tapped his shoulder. "I'll trouble you not to use that

sort of language in front of my girl."

The burly man looked at him and beyond him, said, "You're drunk, Joe," and turned away.

Martin tapped his shoulder again. "I said I'd trouble you —"

"You will, Joe, if you keep it up," the burly man told him, keeping a poker face. "Where is this girl you're talking about? In the washroom? I tell you, Joe, you're drunk."

"She's sitting right beside me," Martin said, enunciating each word with care and staring grimly into the eyes of the poker face.

The burly man smiled. He seemed suddenly amused. "Okay, Joe," he said, "let's investigate this girl of yours. What's she like? Describe her to me."

"Why, you —" Martin began, drawing back his arm.

Bobby caught hold of it. "No, lover," she said in a curiously intent voice. "Do as he says."

"Why the devil —"

"Please, lover," she told him. She was smiling tightly. Her eyes were gleaming. "Do just as he says."

Martin shrugged. His own smile was tight as he turned back to the burly man. "She's about twenty. She's got hair like pale gold. She looks a bit like Veronica Lake. She's dressed in black and she's got a black cigarette lighter."

Martin paused. Something in the poker face had changed. Perhaps it was a shade less ruddy. Bobby was tugging at his arm.

"You haven't told him about the scar," she said excitedly.

He looked at her, frowning.

"Tell him about the scar too."

"Oh, yes," he said, "and she's got the faintest scar running down from her left temple over her left eyelid and the bridge of her nose, and across her right cheek to the lobe of her —"

He stopped abruptly. The poker face was ashen, its lips were working. Then a red tide started to flood up into it, the eyes began to look murder.

Martin could feel Bobby's warm breath in his ear, the flick of her wet tongue. "Now, lover. Get him now. That's Jeff."

Swiftly, yet very deliberately, Martin shattered the rim of his chaser glass against the shot glass and jammed it into the burly man's flushing face.

A shriek that wasn't in the score came out of the clarinet. Someone in the booths screamed hysterically. A bar stool went over as someone else cringed away. Pops screamed. Then everything was whirling movement and yells, grabbing hands and hurtling shoulders, scrambles and sprawls, crashes and thumps, flashes of darkness and light, hot breaths and cold drafts, until Martin realized that he was running with Bobby beside him through gray pools of street light, around a

corner into a darker street, around another corner. . . .

Martin stopped, dragging Bobby to a stop by her wrist. Her dress had fallen open. He could glimpse her small breasts. He grabbed her in his arms and buried his face in her warm neck, sucking in the sweet, heavy reek of gardenia.

She pulled away from him convulsively. "Come on, lover," she gasped in an agony of impatience. "Hurry, lover, hurry."

And they were running again. Another block and she led him up some hollowed steps and past a glass door and tarnished brass mailboxes and up a worn-carpeted stair. She fumbled at a door in a frenzy of haste, threw it open. He followed her into darkness.

"Oh, lover, hurry," she threw to him.

He slammed the door.

Then it came to him, and it stopped him in his tracks. The awful stench. There was gardenia in it, but that was the smallest part. It was an elaboration of all that is decayed and rotten in gardenia, swollen to an unbearable putrescence.

"Come to me, lover," he heard her cry. "Hurry, hurry, lover, hurry — what's the matter?"

The light went on. The room was small and dingy with table and chairs in the center and dark, overstuffed things back against the walls. Bobby dropped to the sagging sofa. Her face was white, taut, apprehensive.

"What did you say?" she asked him.

"That awful stink," he told her, involuntarily grimacing his distaste. "There must be something dead in here."

Suddenly her face turned to hate. "Get out!"

"Bobby," he pleaded, shocked. "Don't get angry. It's not your fault."

"Get out!"

"Bobby, what's the matter? Are you sick? You look green."

"*Get out!*"

"Bobby, what are you doing to your face? What's happening to you? *Bobby! BOBBY!*"

Pops spun the glass against the towel with practiced rhythm. He eyed the two girls on the opposite side of the bar with the fatherliness of an old and snub-nosed satyr. He drew out the moment as long as he could.

"Yep," he said finally, "it wasn't half an hour after he screwed the glass in that guy's face here that the police picked him up in the street outside her apartment, screaming and gibbering like a baboon. At first they were sure he was the one who killed her, and I guess they gave him a real going-over. But then it turned out he had an ironclad alibi for the time of the crime."

(Continued on page 161)

THE
Sin

BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

If you like belly-laughs based on biology, stranglings strewn with sex, tenterhooks that are titillating, then we heartily recommend this story of a French town beset by a killer from beyond the stars — a killer that seeks as victims those whose blood runs hot. Death follows death as the townspeople bar their doors; yet all the time the answer lies in the twisted mind of Hyacinth Peuch, the village idiot.

. . . Here is a story Honoré de Balzac might well have written. While Eric Frank Russell probably aspires to no such place in literature, a tale like this might well put him there!

IN one of the dales of Brittany close upon the woody border of the Department de Morbihan nestles a tiny village called Chateauverne. Is that name familiar to you?

If it isn't, that is because M. le Préfect de Morbihan and his superiors in Paris did all they could to keep its stranglings out of the newspapers. There is no point in spreading terror beyond terror. Besides, the tourist trade had to be considered.

The Abbé Courtot cooperated by sealing the lips of the faithful so far as they could be sealed, which was for about five yards

Illustrator: L. R. Summers

OF HYACINTH PEUCH

from his person, he being somewhat deaf.

To look at Chateauverne today you would find it difficult to believe that not so long ago its inhabitants feared to walk in darkness. Some of the signs are still there: a certain tenseness among the younger folk, a reluctance to take their love-making into the shadowed nooks of seldom-used paths.

If observant, you will note that even the oldest, most neglected and tumbledown houses have heavy shutters of solid oak fitted with enormous bolts and hand-forged bars that kept Emile Périè busy at his anvil for more than a month.

Here and there may be seen a few tired-eyed folk in somber clothes. The attendance at the Église St. Marie is twenty per cent greater than of yore, more regular, more reverent. Of course, there still remains a hard core of incorrigibles who sit the other side of the square, drinking and spitting, watching the parade of the pious with the air of men convinced that only dirty people need to wash. Nevertheless, the Devil added to the Abbé's flock by taking away from it.

Chateauverne is a cluster of terra-cotta-roofed houses hugging a cobbled square where Hyacinth Peuch, the local imbecile, slumbers among the hogs and chickens. At one side rises the solemn-belled tower of the Eglise. Next to it sits the hoary home of the Abbé and the general store of the Widow Martin. At the opposite side, shading the seated cynics, is the long, low auberge of Jean-Pierre Boitavin, whose brother Baptiste was the fourth to be slaughtered before the rain came.

The population numbers six hundred, has not waxed or waned in the last couple of centuries. Chateauverne's citizens are almost entirely devoted to agriculture — if constant itching and bitching can be called devotion — and therefore have the earthy sophistication of those in daily contact with lower and gustier forms of life. They procreated judiciously, with one eye upon later years and the other on the bank balance. In the Abbé's opinion they knew more than was good for their immortal souls.

Death clattered bonily onto this stage one warm evening in May when the air was rich and slumbersome and night beetles droned under the trees.

Josephine Rimbaud had a date. She was young, buxom, interestingly rounded and far from overburdened with intellectual capacity. This tender and inviting handicap lent a splendid impartiality to her emotions, so much so, indeed, that she had been known to respond with a tempting smile to the vacuous grin of Hyacinth

Peuch who — though not so far sunk in idiocy as to overlook a well-turned leg — was generally regarded as a most deplorable accomplice in any amatory adventure.

That Josephine should be a trifle lacking in one respect while obviously possessing more than a sufficiency in others was a matter requiring correction at somebody's hands. It is natural to urge others toward perfection. Of the many tutors who were eager to assist with her education she chose Hercule Girandole, a farmer's son, because he had wavy hair and Hercule sounds massive and mighty and a *girandole* is a revolving firework. She was by no means averse to dallying with a revolving firework.

So at eight o'clock when shadows were deepening Josephine set forth, intent upon improving her mind by taking simple lessons in biology from the worthy and accomplished Hercule. She had attired herself in ribbons and flounces that suitably enhanced her feminine attractions, was sweetly scented in the likeliest places and athirst for education.

Trotting gaily in the full length of the Avenue des Hirondelles, once part of the Verne estate, she took a narrow, thicket-flanked path toward the old plantation where a dozen generations before her had shyly retired for the same delightful purpose.

The trysting place was by a small granite obelisk inscribed: *Ici La Météorite de 1897*. This was not literally correct, for the stone from space had been exhumed years ago and sent some place where it could be snooped over by profound old men long in the hair and short in the sight. Even the hole it had caused was now filled and overgrown. Trees crowded all around, shutting out the rays of the inquisitive moon and assuring a pleasing privacy for the vibrant couples beneath.

Stopping by the obelisk, Josephine peered around as best she could in the semi-dark. A warm, gentle wind sighed through the trees. The turf was softer than a bed. Josephine was ready.

"Hercule!" She whispered it tremulously. She could do little else. Such an underbreath call is seductive, enticing, whereas the commanding bellow she yearned to utter would have been unmaidenly. She tidied her bosom, wondering whether he was hiding from her, tantalizing her, waiting for her to ripen to desperation. "Hercule!"

No response. Only the rustling of the trees and the wind sighing high. She frowned. Possibly he was late. If so, it was unseemly of him. The female may be tardy to emphasize her modesty, her shy reluctance to enter the trap so long as no other female beats her to it.

But the male should be on time. Better still, ahead of time, early. Stamping, fidgeting, alternating between hope and despair, racked by passion, consumed with desire.

This was too bad. Her indignation rising along with her inward hunger, she walked around the obelisk, sought behind a bush, went to investigate the other side of a nearby tree and tumbled headlong over a pair of tangled legs.

Scrambling upright with no other thought than that this evening had a potent curse upon it, she stooped and peered at the legs, followed the dim shape along to its distorted face, discovered that the revolving firework would fizz no more.

Josephine turned and ran. No screams. No gasps. No wild and terrible calls for help. Only her mouth open, her ample hips swinging as she ran in utter silence, without stop or pause, the full two kilometers to the village. The first person she saw was the Widow Martin looming massively in the doorway of her store. Racing up to her she gasped a few frantic words, dropped to the cobblestones and gave herself over to a fit of hysterics.

Now, the Widow Martin weighed one hundred kilos, had a black mustache and once had killed a hog with a backhand blow intended to discourage it from her vegetable patch. Germaine Joubert, the village gossip, often swore that the unfortunate animal had performed three somersaults before it closed its eyes and expired with an expression exactly like that of the late Henri Martin in his last moments, a similarity that might well be no coincidence. You will gather from this that the Widow Martin was *très formidable* and the last person to be moved by Josephine's anguish.

Staring down over her lip-fungus, she snapped, "No matter what that wastrel Girandole has done, rolling in horse-dung will not cure it."

Hippolyte Lemaître left his seat outside the auberge and mooched across the square, followed by Hyacinth Peuch and several others. All gaped at Josephine, especially at the little extra she did not display in more sanguine moments.

Hippolyte spoke to the Widow Martin: "What is wrong, Hortense?"

"That Girandole, he has been clumsy."

"Tut!" said Hippolyte, to whom lack of dexterity in mating was the unforgivable sin.

"Hercule!" Josephine sat up, her eyes wet, red, and full of horror. "He is dead!"

"What?" exclaimed Hippolyte.

"Dead?" said the Widow Martin.

"All twisted up and wrung dry. I saw him." She flopped back, started another fit. "Terrible! Terrible!"

"It will rain soon," giggled Hyacinth Peuch, exposing teeth like aged and falling tombstones. "Plenty of rain — you'll see!"

"Where is this?" demanded Hippolyte Lemaître, frowning down. "Where? Speak, child!"

"By the meteor stone."

"Probably she dropped it on him," was the Widow Martin's muscular suggestion.

"I didn't!" screamed Josephine.

Germaine Joubert arrived, her thin nose twitching, her watery eyes darting this way and that. "You didn't *what?*"

"She didn't give in to Girandole," informed the Widow Martin, who always thought of Germaine as something staring beady-eyed around the bend of a sewer. "She cut out his guts. It was death before dishonor."

"I didn't!" Josephine shrieked.

"My!" said Germaine, her false hair trying to stand up with the real. "*My!*" She hurried away to be the first to distribute the news.

"Well," said Hippolyte, doubtfully, "I will go and telephone Sif. Somebody had better look into this right away."

The Widow Martin nodded, watched him walk away. Ignoring Josephine, she sat on her doorstep, stroked idly at her upper lip.

"It will rain soon," repeated Hyacinth Peuch. He snickered, studying her with his head held lopsided. "Much rain. You'll see!"

Half an hour later it poured in torrents.

Napoleon Sif, the gendarme from Pontaupis, arrived upon his bicycle within the hour. His cape streamed with water, his socks were damp. He had the bilious wariness of one who is a natural as the victim of some dark conspiracy. Like most folk of Pontaupis, nine kilometers away, he viewed Chateauverne as a sink of iniquity where anything might happen and usually did.

Stamping into the auberge, he shook his cape all over the floor, banged his peaked cap on the back of a chair, mopped his face with a handkerchief.

"What is this I hear? About a dead one?"

A chorus of voices answered him:

"Young Girandole."

"Curled round and round like a

tire-bouchon, under a tree, in the rain."

"Cold and bloodless by the obelisk."

"Old Rimbaud took Josephine home saying that he will beat the truth out of her."

"Hortense Martin thinks that—"

"Who cares what Hortense thinks?"

"Will you have a cognac?" asked Jean-Pierre Boitavin. "You are wet enough to have bicycled along the bed of the canal."

"But certainly." Sif became mollified. He eyed the glass, gently swirled its contents around, sniffed the bouquet, drank a little and smacked his lips. "Hah! Let Girandole wait. He can be no damper even if floating."

"Yes, let him wait," approved Jean-Pierre. "Even as I must wait unto the crack of doom. He owed me forty francs. A man has no right to die while owing forty francs. It is indecent."

Finishing his drink, Sif nodded agreement, having no difficulty in seeing the ethics of this. "If everyone did it we should all be ruined." Buttoning his cape, he posed with saturated authority. "One or two of you had better come with me to show where this debtor has expired."

A couple volunteered, more from morbid curiosity than any sense of public duty. Going out, they encountered the Abbé Courtot hurrying through the rain. The old priest stopped at the sight of officialdom.

"What brings you here, my son? Nothing serious I hope?"

"Girandole is stiff in the woods."

"Indeed?" The Abbé shook a sorrowful head. "Hercule will not like that."

"No?" Sif stared at him.

"A drunken father is a source of shame."

"*Young* Girandole," yelled Sif right in his ear. "He is *dead!*"

"Dear me!" The Abbé took a startled step backward and massaged his hearing organ. "How dreadful! Such a nice young fellow. So well behaved."

Greatly troubled, he peered short-sightedly after them as they disappeared into the dark rain.

Most of the population of Chateauverne viewed the corpse, felt sick in their stomachs and had bad dreams. Excepting Emile Périè and the Widow Martin, both exceptionally hard characters. The brothers Bôitavin made a special trip to l'Orient for a truck-load of extra cognac.

Two aged, uncertain doctors and Napoleon Sif agreed between them that no body could be so fearfully warped by any human agency and that therefore it would be best to place the blame in the broad, accommodating lap of the Almighty. They gave it forth that Hercule had been cut off in the flower of his youth by a bolt of

lightning. It was, they asserted, an act of God, moving in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.

To Girandole the Elder — whose wild oats once had been sown so fast that he had seldom been seen perpendicular, and who now spent his declining years dreaming with relish of bygone helling — it was pointed out that the sins of the fathers shall be paid for by posterity. Which system of justice, in his view, had much to be said for it.

Josephine, already recovered from her shock and looking around for new and vigorous conquerors, was sermonized to the effect that perhaps one minute of modesty had saved her from sharing the fate of her lover.

At the funeral the Abbé Courtot made full and legitimate use of the mournful circumstances, lecturing all and sundry upon various aspects of celestial vengeance, its sureness, its inevitability, and making oblique reference to the less than holy habits of certain parties whom everybody promptly identified as everybody else.

Hercule went down the hole. Napoleon cycled back to Pontaupis. Josephine Rimbaud permitted young Armand Descoules to accompany her in approximately a homeward direction, hoping that somewhere en route he might see fit to offer more than spiritual consolation. Hyacinth Peuch stayed to help fill the grave, scrabbling the soil with his bare hands and letting saliva drip down with it.

The whole affair became reduced to a matter of gossip with appropriate shoulder-shrugs and gestures. No more than that until six days afterward when the next killing occurred.

Hyacinth Peuch brought the evil news. He shambled up to the little group seated outside the Boitavin hostelry, hung his head sidewise and grimaced at them.

"Much rain soon."

"Go away, fool," said one, impatiently.

"Plenty of rain. Wash the blood down." His giggle was squeaky and all slobber-mouthed. "Laverne's blood."

"Laverne has no blood," declared Lemaître, winking at the others.

This was more of an exaggeration than an untruth. Jules Laverne, a tall, gangling, moody character was so emaciated that he was known as *Le Pendu*, the hanging man.

His thin, beaky features bore a fancied resemblance to those of the late Seigneurs of Verne, and this — coupled with his surname — had bred in him the delusion that he had been deprived of his rightful inheritance by some gang of snide lawyers. Jules therefore comported himself at all times with the dour dignity of a diddled

duke, made periodic inspections of *his* property by touring the dilapidated Verne estate, and occasionally searched the civil records of nearby towns for an ancient marriage certificate which did not exist, the specific union in which he was interested having taken place only in bed.

"Lots of blood from Laverne," insisted Hyacinth, making himself sound gluttonous. "Near the meteor stone."

"Eh? *Where?*"

"All twisted up like the other one. I saw him." He dribbled at the recollection of it. "Rain soon!"

There was no sign of the promised downpour. Thin streamers from the sinking sun spread partway across an otherwise clear sky. Despite this the group stirred uneasily, not liking undue positiveness in an idiot. And besides, if a second one were doomed to be smitten in the plantation, Laverne was as likely a subject as any and likelier than most. He was always mooching around the place, thinking of what might have been. They eyed Hyacinth, gazed at each other.

Before anyone could make remark Germaine Joubert hurried up, her little eyes swift and eager.

"Would you believe it? Incredible!" She paused to build up suspense, then: "That skinny castoff Jules Laverne left his bicycle outside Tillie Benoit's cottage *all* night! He didn't go home. Outrageous! What could she possibly see in him? Or he in her? And the blatancy of it, leaving it there like an advertisement of his presence, openly boasting of his misdeeds. If you ask me —"

"Nobody *is* asking you, Gabble-Gob," assured Hippolyte, who often swore that Germaine could take the heat off a dung-hill.

"Eh? Did I hear aright, Monsieur?"

"You did, Clatter-Trap. Take your wagging tongue elsewhere."

She tossed an indignant and self-righteous head. "Permit me to tell you, M. Lemaître, that were it not for the few who are pure —"

"By compulsion rather than by choice," he said pointedly, and watched her hustle away with nose held high. To the others he opined, "Tillie Benoit would not smile upon Jules for fifty thousand francs. She is as warm and responsive as a lump of stone. Eventually she will give to the worms what she has denied to men."

"So?" encouraged one.

"But her cottage is by the path through the plantation. Therefore, I am going to the obelisk. Who comes?"

"I will."

Another grumbled, "In that case I might as well share this folly."

"Rain soon," reminded Hyacinth Peuch, showing yellow teeth.

"Wash the blood down."

"Rain, rain, rain," commented the grumbler. "Always he speaks of rain. As if we have not had enough." He spat on the ground vigorously. "The poor fool listens too much to miserable dirt-diggers who call themselves farmers. Invariably the weather is bringing them to the verge of bankruptcy. They will never be satisfied until they have rain every night and a shower of sewage Sundays. That is all they ask of God: rain and sewage. The *Banque de France* will provide the rest."

Thunderheads had appeared by the time they reached the inscribed stone: *Ici La Météorite de 1897*. The first drops were falling as they bore Laverne's crumpled figure into the square.

Napoleon Sif had another soaking, as did the two doctors. They mooned over the bizarre shape which appeared to have undergone some weird, unimaginable torment before seeking to establish new claims in another and higher estate. Every bone was broken, every joint dislocated. The torso had been turned around upon its hips. The head stared with ghastly incongruity over its own spine. The legs had been plaited like strings.

Lightning, ventured Sif, does not strike twice in the same place. One doctor pooh-poohed, saying it was a myth. The other declared that lightning could and did hit ten times in one spot, especially if iron ore lay beneath. Anyway, Laverne's cadaver had been found precisely three meters from the site of Girandole's. It was the verdict as before: death from a bolt.

They buried Jules Laverne along with all his futile hopes and idle dreams. Sif returned to Pontaupis. The Boitavins trucked more booze from l'Orient. Hyacinth Peuch stamped dirt into the grave.

The Abbé Courtot spoke solemnly of the sin of aping one's betters, of how pride goes before a fall, of the tinsel tawdriness of worldly treasure. You can't, he asserted, take it with you — which piece of theistic information was translated by the pious Josephine as an authoritative injunction to use it while it is still warm.

The name of Laverne became added to that of Girandole as subject for morbid talk, and neither held any greater significance for forty-eight hours. This is only a short time, the reason for its brevity being that Laverne had not surrendered much juice, so that the third death followed fairly soon.

The very casualness of the next announcement enhanced its horror. It was the early evening of market day, the one occasion of

each week when Chateauverne considered itself wide open and roaring.

Emile Périè came picking his way across the square, dodging crates of chickens, stepping over snoring hogs. A giant of a man, hairy-chested, furry-armed, with thick, menacing eyebrows, he was called behind his back and at a safe distance *L'Encadreur*, the picture-framer. Despite the fact that he was the village blacksmith, this tag of another profession had clung to him since the memorable day when he'd become trapped by his buttocks in an ill-fitting privy and remained there until four rescuers arrived to tear him free. As he was a hard, taciturn man, that long-gone episode was the only matter about which he was sensitive.

Passing a wall shored up by glum drunks, and a fence that served as a perch for a small row of septuagenarian fanny-fans, Emile lumbered heavily into the auberge, signed to Baptiste and rumbled in a hoarse undertone, "Another!"

Baptiste Boitavin was puzzled, having seen him enter. "Emile, how can I serve you another when you have not yet had a first?"

"I will have a first now. A double cognac. It will be timely." Périè's hands made twisting motions as if they were screwing the neck of an invisible chicken. "There has been another."

A paleness came into Baptiste's face as he got it this time. Glancing at the other customers he leaned across the bar, lowered his voice. "Who?"

"Portale." The hands screwed again. "Like that. Round and round." He took a mouthful of cognac. "Burst open and squeezed dry, like a rotten orange."

"A-a-a-ah!" Baptiste drew back. "The telephone!"

"Let us suffer no more cretins from Pontaupis," suggested Périè. "The time for fumblers has gone."

"I will summon the gendarmerie from Vannes. Where is the body? In the plantation?"

"No. I carried it here myself. Limp and flexible as wet string. It is in the chapel. Only the Widow Martin saw me." He remained there, leaning on the bar, nursing his drink and looking casual until Baptiste returned from the telephone and threw him a nod. His answering shrug meant, "Oh, well, that is that!" before he tramped out and went to his forge for a three-kilo hammer to lay by his bed.

For some mysterious reason that will never be solved, the first response to Baptiste's appeal for aid came in the form of an excited fire-squad with one twelve-meter ladder and three multiple pumps. Having cut the record time from Vannes by most of a minute, this circus arrived in the square with an uproarious clamor of bells and

gongs, scattering chickens, ducks, cabbages and gossipers. At once Chateauverne was in a turmoil, as willing helpers ran in all directions seeking the nonexistent conflagration. Among certain inebriates there was some talk of starting a suitable blaze to justify the expense and *élan* of the visit.

An hour later, after much shouting, arguing, waving of hands and repeated telephone calls to Vannes, the fire-fighters withdrew, taking with them three bottles of sour wine and earnest requests not to try Pontaupis, which ought to have been razed to the ground long ago.

Less spectacularly, a carload of gendarmes sneaked down a side-lane, pulled up outside the chapel. They went inside. Germaine Joubert saw them, drew others with her to the door. News soon began to fly from mouth to mouth, sobering the village.

"A third one."

"Like the others."

"It is Portale."

They were shocked even though this did not come quite so close to their own doorsteps, for Magnifico Portale was not a native of Chateauverne. Of foreign extraction, believed to be Iberian, he had wandered the countryside for years, earning a precarious living with the aid of a face full of love and a heart full of larceny. It was freely rumored that Magnifico had also fathered seventeen children, eight of them by his wife. Despite this copulatory nonchalance, he was held in some small measure of esteem because, having brought joy to the formerly childless, this sin was no more than Christian charity.

The gendarmes took Magnifico away, more violently contorted than ever he'd been in life. The following mid-day they returned with long boxes, spades, and an official paper full of whereases and heretofores. They dug up Girandole and Laverne, packed them, drove them away to Vannes.

By this time Chateauverne had decided that twice is enough and three times too much. The superb marksmanship of lightning-bolts strained the credulity, especially seeing that nothing similar had occurred within living memory. A murderer must be on the loose, a maniac, an assassin.

Up went the oak shutters. Emile Périè's forge huffed and puffed and produced hammering noises as it strove to cope with a sudden boom in bigger and better bolts and bars. Armand Descoules had the streets to himself after eight-thirty, was compelled to court Josephine within stone's throw of her door, and had to postpone his romantic intention of taking what little was left of her all.

On the fourth night after the bodies had been taken to Vannes, with speculation still rife and fear still stalking the darker lanes,

Baptiste Boitavin came to a decision.

"This savage has slaughtered only by night and in the plantation. That is a game at which two can play." He produced a heavy double-barreled gun. "Let us seek him and put an end to him."

"An excellent idea," approved Hippolyte Lemaître. "They slumber in Vannes with the porcine contentment of those well-fattened upon taxes. We could all be garrotted one at a time in alphabetical order before they awoke. We must take action ourselves."

There were murmurs of agreement. Only Timothée Clotaire, the morbid sexton from the Église, saw fit to oppose. He was the sort of man who invariably has a problem ready for every solution.

"What if this killer is not a human being?"

"We know he is not. He is inhuman." Baptiste spat on the floor. "Death to him!"

"What if he is non-human, such as a mad gorilla?"

"It is all the same. We shall blow him apart."

"Or perhaps a rogue elephant escaped from the *Cirque Nationale?*" Timothée persisted. His look reduced Baptiste's gun to matchstick size as mentally he measured it against an elephant.

"It can be a twenty-meter boa-constrictor for all I care," said Baptiste stoutly. He shouldered his weapon. "I am ready. Who else is ready to go with me?"

Ten of them went out, brought back seven shotguns, one target pistol, one antique cutlass and one oak bludgeon formidably studded with brass nails. Filled with martial ferocity, this group set forth, followed at a distance by Hyacinth Peuch, curious and yellow-toothed.

For three hours they beat to and fro through the woods, hallooing to each other and urinating at frequent intervals, disturbing the owls and rabbits but sighting nothing maniacal or monstrous. One by one they gave up and went home, each man according to the measure of his patience.

At three o'clock in the morning Jean-Pierre Boitavin pummeled and thumped upon Hippolyte Lemaître's door, aroused him from bed.

"Ah, so! You are there! Are all the others back?"

"Probably." Hippolyte rubbed his eyes, too stupid with sleep to feel irritation. "What is the matter, Jean-Pierre?"

"Where is Baptiste?"

"He has not returned?" Hippolyte bleared at his clock, saw the lateness of the hour, was jerked into immediate wakefulness. He threw down a key. "Come inside and wait while I dress. We must seek Baptiste."

They found him exactly where they had expected, though neither had been willing to admit it to

the other. Near the meteor stone, his undischarged weapon beside a cold hand. He was scarcely recognizable.

A long box arrived from Vannes and bore Baptiste away under the inquisitive gaze of Roger Corbeau, a tousle-haired youngster of twelve. Roger was by nature so unappreciative of danger, even when it breathed down his neck, that already he had broken four bones, been stitched seven times, and had his life despaired of twice.

This was not because he was stuffed with foolhardy courage so much as the plain dumbness of the accident-prone. In other words, he had something in common with Hyacinth Peuch, only it was not so far developed. Among local connoisseurs of disaster, it was generally agreed that Roger was not long for this world because Jesus wanted him for a sunbeam.

In this respect the oracles were dead on the beam. Roger went obediently to bed, escaped via a dormer window, made straight for the plantation with the object of seeing for himself how it was done. His enthusiasm might have evaporated within the hour had he been kept waiting that long, but characteristically he picked a moment when service was prompt and efficient. In due course he was sought, discovered, scraped up and driven to Vannes in a short container, under a steady downpour.

Two gendarmes with loaded carbines remained to patrol the plantation night-times. Nothing happened in the next ten days, during which the weather stayed consistently warm and fine. Though bored with their task they kept dutifully to it, hearing nothing suspicious, seeing no cause for alarm.

At ten-twenty in the evening of the eleventh night, one of them went to Tillie Benoit's cottage for the coffee she prepared by official arrangement. He carried the can moodily, for the atmosphere had grown cold and indicative of coming rain. Moreover, he felt that the hot drinks could have been dispensed by someone comelier and more sociable than Tillie. She was a thin and frigid female who doled out the stuff as if she were conferring favors on lepers.

Nevertheless, he dallied with Tillie as long as he could, engaging her in conversation full of high morals and low purposes, keeping at her with the rugged determination of one who views every fortress as a challenge to conquest and, in any case, has to maintain a carefully cultivated reputation for being hotter than a tomcat full of curry.

It was almost an hour before he returned, defeated. Reaching the obelisk, he stared around.

"Marcel!"

Silence.

"*Marcel!*"

No response.

Loudly and with a slight quaver, "MARCEL!"

A cool wind whispered through the trees. There was an acrid scent, faint but familiar and disturbing. He sniffed twice, thrice, trying to remember.

Blood!

The can dropped from his left hand, the carbine from his right. Abandoning Marcel, he whirled around and ran as he had never run before.

Forty men of the first field company of the 23me. Infantry of the Line marched in next afternoon, stationed themselves around the plantation with strict order to permit no entry. A newspaper reporter came from l'Orient, was sent by the Widow Martin in feckless pursuit of an imaginary massacre in Pontaupis, where one was long overdue. M. le Préfect de Morbihan visited Chateauverne in person, toured it three minutes, went away.

The next week was uneventful. Tillie Benoit gave the brush-off to forty soldiers, all of whom decided that their little dog mascot had a similar mother. M. le Capitaine, their commanding officer, had no opinion on this matter, he being well satisfied with an address where he could perform those carpet calisthenics so necessary to a warrior's health and spirits.

So far as anyone could discern, little else was being done about successive tragedies, but on the evening of Thursday a person presented himself at the auberge. He was a small, slight man, dapper, with a neat white goatee beard and peculiarly cold blue eyes.

"Are you Jean-Pierre Boitavin?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

The other produced a card.

Georges Fournier, Inspecteur. Sûreté Générale.

"Ah, the Sûreté!" said Jean-Pierre, overwhelmed. "It is not necessary to ask what brings you here."

Inspecteur Fournier nodded. "I have already cross-examined a number of people: the Abbé Courtot, Périè, Lemaître, Madame Martin and others. All those whose information might be helpful. Only two names remain on my list: yours and" — he took out a little notebook and consulted it — "one Hyacinth Peuch." The icy eyes bored into Jean-Pierre. "Kindly recite all you know of these affairs."

Obediently, Jean-Pierre recounted events with as much detail as he could bring to mind.

"It is the same story," commented Fournier. "Now, where is this Peuch? Where might he be found?"

"Right outside." Jean-Pierre pointed into the square. "That is he, the afflicted one playing with cabbage stalks."

"So! Is he capable of speech?"

"But certainly, Monsieur. It is only that he is shy of strangers." He thought a moment. "I will summon him here and give him a generous cognac. We will wait while it fumes through his bowels. Then you may buy him another. They will have a fraternal effect. After two cognacs he will kiss you upon the forehead with lavish distribution of sputum."

"Call him," ordered Fournier, accustomed to suffering in the line of duty.

Hyacinth came in with the drag-legged, lopsided gait of the half-witted. He absorbed a cognac slowly, suspiciously, having learned from village pranksters to beware those who come bearing gifts.

"Hyacinth knows when it will rain," remarked Jean-Pierre, flattering the tippler to put him at his ease. "If he says it will, it does. After each death he promised that the angels would weep, and they did!"

"Indeed?" Fournier studied the graveyard aspect of Hyacinth's molars. "Why should it rain after death?"

"Wash the blood down," informed Hyacinth. Finishing the cognac, he smacked thick lips, giggled.

"Wash it down where?"

"Into the roots."

"Ah, yes, the roots," agreed Fournier. He raised an inquiring eyebrow. "And which roots may these be?"

"The tree's." Hyacinth mooned at his empty glass.

"Give him another," Fournier ordered Jean-Pierre. "Now Monsieur Peuch, I am immensely interested in trees. Of which tree do you speak?"

Manifestly overcome by being addressed as Monsieur Peuch, the half-wit stammered, "The — the big one that squeezes rabbits."

A sharp gleam became visible in Fournier's eyes as he asked, "You have actually *seen* it do that?"

Hyacinth did not reply.

"Show me *how* it did it," invited Fournier, patiently.

"Go on, show the gentleman," Jean-Pierre encouraged. "They have never seen or heard of such a thing in Paris."

With some reluctance, Hyacinth put down his glass, stood up, extended both arms stiffly above his head, lifted his face to stare at the ceiling.

"Like this all day," he informed. "Cannot move because of the light, the terrible light. But at night —"

"Well?"

"Things run over roots, things with blood."

"Go on!" urged Fournier.

"Then . . ." He took a deep breath. His rigid, upraised arms trembled down their length. Suddenly he swept them toward his toes, bringing them down in a swift arc with all the force he could command. His fingers grabbed at the floor. The arms arose as his body straightened. He stood before them in ghastly imbecility, gurgling with pleasure while his hands made screwing motions and shook imaginary blood over his feet.

"Then soon," he said, "it rains."

Jean-Pierre tilted the cognac bottle. "I must have one myself." He swilled it down, stared at Hyacinth. "A tree! Name of a dog! How can there be such a tree?"

"And you have seen rabbits so killed?" said Fournier. "Often? For long?"

"Four-five-six years. Maybe more. I don't know." Hyacinth raised a hand level with his head. "Since the tree was as big as me."

"Does this happen frequently?" persisted Fournier.

"Only when it is dark and rain is coming," said Hyacinth, wise in the ways of the eerie. "No rain, no kill."

Fournier did not bother to inquire why the other had said nothing of this before now. He knew the answer: a fool soon learns not to be loud in his folly.

"You will take us to this tree?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

In gathering darkness, the deadly growth looked little different from other trees standing nearby. Just a thick, warty trunk with upraised limbs and a mass of broad, fleshy leaves. It was exactly eight meters from the obelisk.

Forty soldiers made an armed and leery ring around it, while Inspecteur Fournier carefully surveyed what could be seen in the light of half-a-dozen lanterns.

"You are certain this is the vegetable assassin?"

"Of a verity, Monsieur," asserted Hyacinth, pleased to find himself the center of attention without being mocked.

"There are no others?"

"No, Monsieur."

"The tale is utter folly," scoffed M. le Capitaine, thwarted in his design to spend that night snatching the village schoolmarm's intangibles. He strode martially through the ring, rapped his cane upon the hard trunk, spoke with authority. "No vegetable has sufficient sensitivity or speed of reaction. Neither can its limbs have any elasticity, therefore —"

His last word was cast away in an outward gust of wind and a tremendous *swi-i-i-ish!* as half-a-dozen great branches shot down and got him. Up he soared into mid-air, being wrung out like a damp dishcloth as he went. Not a scream came from him, not a cry. There were no sounds other than

those of cracking bones, bursting flesh and the patter-patter of glutinous droplets beneath.

The branches gave a final jerk which tossed the body away, then rose to their former position. Silent, impassive, satisfied, the tree stood in the dark.

Muttering grim profanities, someone cast the light of his lantern over the body. M. le Capitaine was in the punk of condition.

"Rain soon," promised Hyacinth Peuch.

Fournier came to life like one emerging from a bad dream. He took command with swiftly barked orders.

"Take this dead one away, right out of reach. Bring wood, faggots, twigs, oil, anything burnable. Throw it toward this monster. Be careful — do not go too near yourselves. Hurry, idiots, hurry!"

They burst into a frenzy of activity. Within short time a pyramid of flung fuel had grown until it reached the lowermost branches. Oil commandeered from Tillie Benoit's lamps and stoves was tossed upon it. Fournier applied the flame in person. Fire caught, flickered, hesitated, suddenly roared to the heavens.

At that point the tree began to thrash around like a mad thing, scattering sparks and burning brands in all directions, full of violent and horrible life. They showed it no mercy. More and more fuel piled onto the flames, building up the pyre until the trunk of an adjacent tree exploded under pressure of boiling sap.

With the dawn there was nothing left but a circle of gray ash, from beneath which they dug charred remnants of roots and made a smaller fire of those. At ten o'clock, tired, dirty, dishevelled, they marched back to the square.

Fournier entered the auberge, washed, ordered breakfast. "It was a tree, a blood-drinking growth from none can guess where. I think that meteor brought with it a seed from a place that knows

(*Continued on page 162*)

WHO says Nature is impartial? In a small town in France, lightning struck into a sheep fold. Every black sheep was killed. All the white ones were left unharmed.

THE history of the world is the record of a man in quest of his daily bread and butter.

— H. W. Van Loon, *The Story of Mankind*

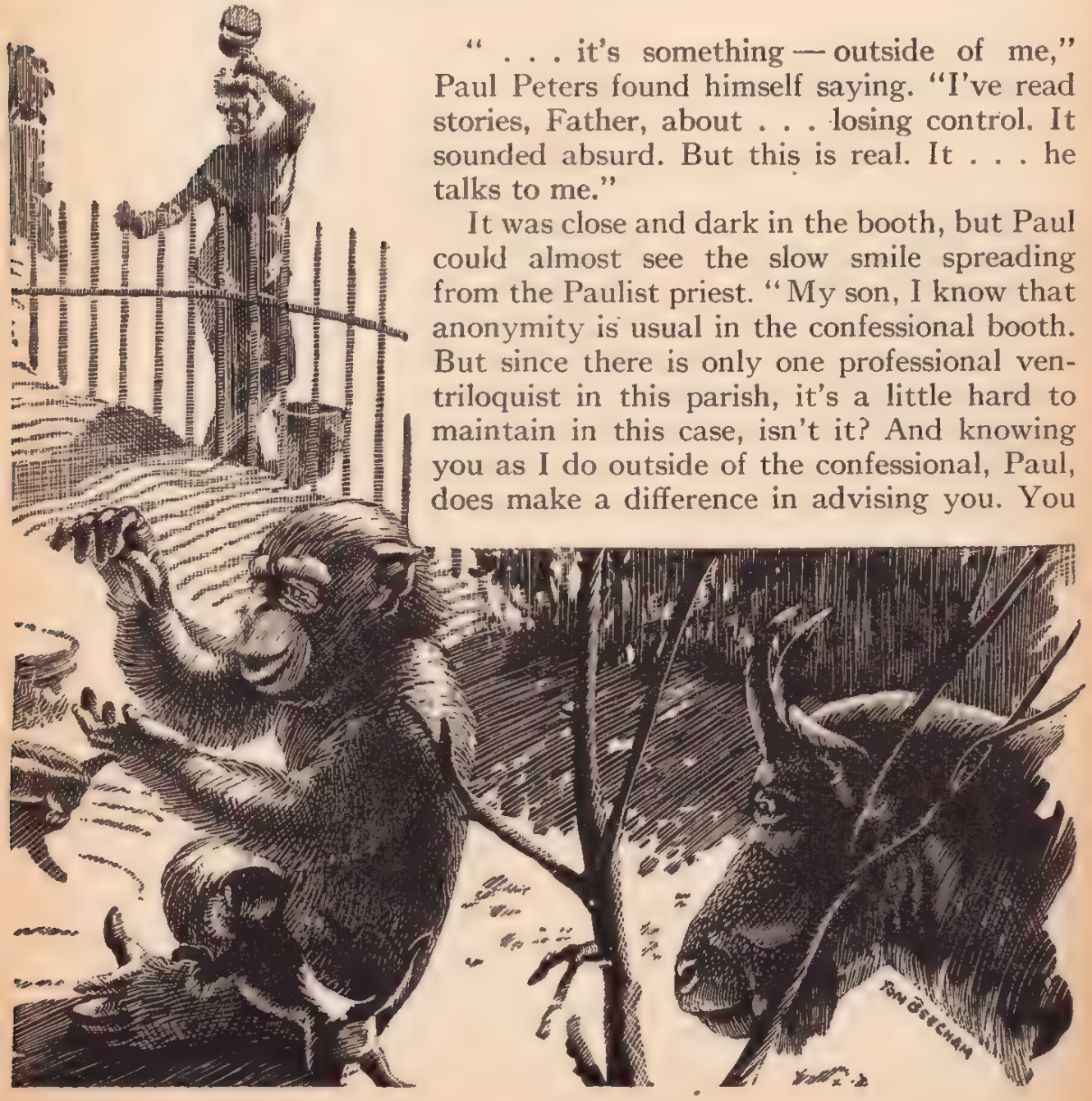
THE STAR DUMMY

BY ANTHONY BOUCHER

Illustrator: Tom Beecham

Digging a story out of Tony Boucher comes under the heading of Labor — physical and callus-forming. As co-editor of one of the better science-fiction journals, plus knocking out a weekly review column on detective novels for the New York Times, *he has little time for other markets. We like to think this story was done as a personal favor to us; but the alacrity with which he cashed our check suggests a more realistic motive.*

The Star Dummy is a refreshing version of the visitors-from-another-world theme. The addition of a wry, but sympathetic, evaluation of human foibles gives the story classic stature.



" . . . it's something — outside of me," Paul Peters found himself saying. "I've read stories, Father, about . . . losing control. It sounded absurd. But this is real. It . . . he talks to me."

It was close and dark in the booth, but Paul could almost see the slow smile spreading from the Paulist priest. "My son, I know that anonymity is usual in the confessional booth. But since there is only one professional ventriloquist in this parish, it's a little hard to maintain in this case, isn't it? And knowing you as I do outside of the confessional, Paul, does make a difference in advising you. You

say that your dummy —"

"Chuck Woodchuck," Paul muttered venomously.

"Chuck talks back to you, says things not in your mind?"

"Yes."

"Not even in your subconscious mind?"

"Can my conscious mind answer that?"

"Question withdrawn. Paul, to certain souls I might say simply fast and pray. To others I might suggest consulting with the Archbishop for permission for a formal exorcism. To you, however, I think I might make a more materialistic recommendation: see an analyst."

Paul groaned in the darkness. "It's more than that. It's something *outside* of me. . . ."

"Occam's razor," the Paulist murmured. "With your fondness for science fiction, you'll appreciate that. See if the simplest answer works. If it doesn't, we can discuss less materialistic causes. See an analyst. And perhaps you needn't offend the good doctor by telling him that I also advise prayer along with his treatment."

" . . . and I see no reason," the eminent analyst concluded, "why we should not dispel your demon in a relatively brief time. In fact, young man, we'll leave you in better shape than when you started having these hallucinations. Your choice of profession is of course highly symptomatic. A predilection for ventriloquism clearly indicates a basically schizoid personality, which chooses to externalize one portion of itself."

Paul brought his attention back from the splendid view of the Bay. "And you'll fix that up?"

The analyst deigned to smile. "Easily, I hope."

"I don't know," Paul ventured, "if you've heard of a friend of mine named Joe Henderson? Writes science fiction?"

"That escapist dianetics-spawning rubbish?" the analyst exclaimed, as if each word were spelled with four letters.

"As you say. My friend went to an analyst, and in the course of the first interview mentioned his profession. 'Aha!' said the doctor gleefully. 'We'll soon put a stop to that nonsense!' "

"Sound attitude," the analyst agreed.

"Only it occurred to Joe that then how was he going to pay his bills — including, of course, the doctor's. So somehow Joe never did get himself analyzed. . . ."

Paul got up hesitantly. "I'm a professional ventriloquist, Doctor. I'm a good one. I make good money. At least, I used to when . . ." his voice became a little unsteady for a trained ventriloquist, or even for a normal man . . . "when Chuck was nothing more than an amusingly carved piece of wood. It's the

only business I know. If you 'cure' me of it, well — Othello's occupation's gone."

"This Othello." The analyst's eyes sharpened. "Another externalization? Does he speak to you too?"

"Tell you what," said Paul. "I'll send Chuck in to see you. He'll tell you more about me than I can."

Which was perfectly true, Paul thought as he rode down fifteen stories. Could anyone, even the psychiatrist — even the priest — imagine what it was like to sit there awake all night in the dark room with the carved wood telling you all about yourself? All the little indecencies, the degradations of humanity hidden deep under your thoughts. Taunting you with the baseness of your flesh viewed with a cold contempt which only wood could feel. Sitting there listening, listening and feeling the contempt probe ever more deeply, ever more accurately.

Somehow he was on the sidewalk in front of the office building, shaking so violently that he suddenly had to force his hands around the standard of a No-Parking sign to keep himself erect.

Fortunately, this was San Francisco, where no one is ever far from a bar. When he was capable again of freeing one hand from the standard, he made the sign of the cross and moved off. A brief wordless prayer and two wordless straight bourbons later he knew, since he could not return to the room where the wood lay, the best place for him that afternoon.

The zoo is a perfect place for relaxation, for undoing internal knots. Paul had often found it so when baffled by script problems, or by the idiosyncrasies of agencies and sponsors. Here are minds of a different order, a cleaner, freer creation to which you can abandon yourself, oblivious of human complexities.

He knew most of the animals by sight as individuals, and he had even acquired a better-than-nodding acquaintance with many of the attendants. It was one of these who literally bumped into him as he stood in front of the parrot cage, and proceeded to make the afternoon far more distracting than he had ever anticipated.

"Tim!" Paul exclaimed. "Where on earth are you running to? Or from? Lion escaped or what?"

"Mr. Peters!" the attendant gasped. "I been chasing all over the place making phone calls to God knows who all. There's something screwy going on over in the wombats'."

"It couldn't pick a better place," Paul smiled. "Catch your breath a minute and tell me what gives."

"Got a cigarette? Thanks. Well, Mr. Peters, I'll tell you: couple of times lately some of the boys they say they see something funny in one of the cages. Somebody checks up, it's always gone. Only today it's in there with the wombats and everybody's looking at it and nobody knows what —"

Paul Peters had always had a highly developed sense of curiosity. (Schizoid externalization? he reflected. No, cancel that. You're forgetting things. This may be fun.) He was already walking toward the wombats' enclosure as he asked, "This thing. What does it look like?"

"Well, Mr. Peters, it's pretty much like a koala," Tim explained, "except for where it's like an anteater."

Paul was never able to better that description. With the exception, of course, that neither koalas nor anteaters have six-digited forepaws with opposing thumbs. But that factor was not obvious on first glance.

He could see the thing now, and it was in body very much like an outsize koala — that oddly charming Australian eucalyptus-climber after whom the Teddy bear was patterned. It had no visible pouch — but then it might be a male — and its ears were less prominent. Its body was about two feet long. And its face was nothing like the flat and permanently startled visage of the koala, but a hairless expanse sloping from a high forehead, past sharp bright eyes, to a protracted proboscis which did indeed resemble nothing so much as the snout of an anteater.

The buzz through which they pushed their way consisted chiefly of "What *is* that?" and "I don't know," with an occasional treble obligato of "*Why* don't you know, Daddy?"

But it was not what it was so much as what it was doing that fascinated Paul. It concentrated on rubbing its right forepaw in circles on the ground, abruptly looking up from time to time at the nearest wombat, while those stumpy marsupials either stared at it detachedly or backed away with suspicion.

"When the other boys saw it," Paul asked, "what was it doing then?"

"It's funny you ask that, Mr. Peters, on account of that's one of the things that's funny about it. What it was doing, I mean. One time when it was in with the llamas it was doing like this, just playing in the dirt."

"Playing?" Paul wondered softly.

"Only when it was in with the monkeys it was chattering at them something fierce, just like a monkey too, this guy said. And when it was in with the lions, well I'm not asking you to believe this and God knows I didn't yesterday

and I don't know as I do now, but this other guy says it give a roar just like a lion. Only not *just* like, of course, because look at it, but like as if you didn't have your radio turned up quite enough."

"Wombats don't make much noise, do they? Or llamas?" All right, Paul said to himself. You're crazy. This is worse than wood talking; but it's nicer. And there *is* a pattern. "Tim," he said abruptly, "can you let me in the wombat enclosure?"

"Jeez, Mr. Peters, there's bigshots coming from the University and . . . But you did give us that show for free at the pension benefit and . . . And," Tim concluded more firmly as he tucked the five unobtrusively into his pocket, "can do, I guess. O.K., everybody! Let's have a little room here. Got to let Dr. Peters in!"

Paul hesitated at the gate. This was unquestionably either the most momentous or the most ridiculous effort he had made in a reasonably momentous-ridiculous life. "Joe Henderson, thou shouldst be with me at this hour!" he breathed, and went in.

He walked up to where the creature squatted by its circles.

He knelt down beside it and pointed his forefinger, first at the small central circle with the lines sticking out all around it, then up at the sun. Next he tapped his finger insistently on the unmarked ground, then thrust it at the large dot on the third of the bigger concentric circles.

The creature looked up at him, and for the first time in his life Paul understood just what Keats had meant by *a wild surmise.* He saw it on the creature's face, and he felt it thrill through his own being.

An animal who can draw, an animal who can recognize a crude diagram of the solar system, is rational — is not merely a beast like the numbly staring wombats.

Hastily the creature held up a single digit of one forepaw and then drew a straight line in the dirt. Paul did the same, with an amused sudden realization of the fact that the figure *one* is probably a straight line in almost any system.

The creature held up two fingers and made an odd squiggle. Paul held up two fingers and made our own particular odd squiggle which is shaped *2*. They almost raced each other through the next three numbers.

At the squiggle shape *5*, the creature looked at Paul's five fingers, hesitated, then advanced by a daring step. It held up both its hands, each with its six digits, and made a straight line followed by an *S*-shaped curve.

Paul thought frantically, and wished that he had majored in mathematics. He held up his ten fingers, then marked down a

straight line followed by a circle. The creature paused a moment, as if rapidly calculating. Then it nodded, looked carefully at Paul's *2* squiggle, held up its own twelve fingers again, and wrote down *12*.

Paul sank back on his heels. This twelve-fingered being had, as was plausible, a duodecimal system, based on twelve as our decimal system is on ten. And it had almost instantaneously grasped the human ten-system so well as to write down its *twelve* in our method.

"Friend," said Paul softly, pitching his voice too low for the crowds outside the enclosure, "you can't understand my language; but in the name of God and Man, welcome to Earth."

"Oh dear," said the creature, "you communicate only by speech! And otherwise you seem such a highly rational being."

Paul gulped. "That's an accusation I haven't had leveled against me recently."

"I never dreamed," it went on, "that the beings shaped like you were the rational ones. I couldn't get any waves from them. I can from you, though, even enough to pick up the language."

"And you got waves from the other animals," Paul mused. "That's why you chattered like a monkey and roared like a lion-not-turned-up-enough. Only they didn't understand your diagrams, so you knew they weren't high enough for you to deal with."

"But why do you have waves and not the others?"

"I am not," said Paul hastily, "a mutant. We can figure out why later. The trouble right now, if I know anything about the people-without-waves, is that nobody's going to believe a word of this scene. As if indeed I did. But it's nicer than wood. . . ."

The creature shuddered, then apologized. "I'm sorry. Something I touched in there. . . ."

"I know," said Paul, abruptly grave and humble. "Maybe we can help each other. God grant. I'm taking a chance — but I think the first thing is to get you out of here before Tim's 'bigshots from the University' show up and maybe decide to dissect you. Will you trust me?"

The pause was a long one — long enough for Paul to think of all the vile weakness of his humanity and know his infinite unworthiness of trust. He could hear the words pouring forth from the wood — and then the creature said simply, "Yes".

And the wood was silent even in memory.

Never, Paul felt, had he invested twenty dollars more wisely. And never had he discovered such unsuspected inborn acting talent as Tim's. There was something approaching genius, in a pure vein of Stanislavsky realism, in

Tim's denunciation of Paul as a publicity-seeker — in his explanation to the crowd that the koala-like object was a highly ingenious mechanical dummy planted here by a venal ventriloquist who had planned to "discover" it as some strange being and trade on the good name of the Zoo itself for his own selfish promotional advancement. Bitter lashings of denunciation followed Paul and the creature as they departed — a matter of minutes, Tim confessed *sotto voce*, before the professors from across the Bay were due.

Now they were parked by the beach in Paul's convertible. Sensibly, he felt he should head for home and privacy; but he still could not quite bring himself to enter that room where Chuck Woodchuck waited.

"First of all, I suppose," he ventured, "comes: what's your name?"

"The nearest, my dear Paul, that your phonetics can come to it is something like *Tarvish.*"

"Glad to meet you. Now — how did you know mine? But of course," he added hastily, "if you can read . . . Well, next: where are you from? Mars?"

Tarvish thought. "Mars . . . Ah, you mean the fourth planet? All that sand . . ." He shuddered as if at a memory of infinite boredom. "No. I'm from a planet called Earth, which revolves around a star called the sun."

"Look!" Paul exclaimed. "Fun's fun, but isn't this a little too much of a muchness? This is Earth. That ball getting low over there is the sun. And you —"

"Don't you understand?" The tip of Tarvish's nose twitched faintly. "Then ask me what kind of a creature I am, what race I belong to."

"All right, Mr. Bones, I'm asking."

"I," said Tarvish, twitching violently, "am a man."

It took Paul a minute to interpret; then his laugh, his first free laugh in days, was as loud as Tarvish's twitching was vigorous. "Of course. Everybody has a name for everything in the universe — everything *else*. But there aren't names for your own race or your own planet or your own star. You're *men*, you're *people*, you live on the *earth*, you're warmed by the *sun*. I remember reading that some Indian languages were like that: the name for the tribe meant simply *the people* and the name for their country was just *the land*. We've smiled at that, and interplanetarily we're doing the same damned thing. All right — where is *your* sun?"

"How can I tell you? You don't know our system of spatial coördinates. I don't understand what I find in your mind about 'constellations', meaningless pictures which look different from

any two points in space, or 'light-years', because your *year* doesn't convey a time-meaning to me."

"It's three hundred and sixty-five days."

"And what is a *day?*"

"Twenty-four — no, skip it. I can see that this is going to be a lot tougher than Joe Henderson and his friends think. Let's start over again. How did you get here?"

Two minutes later Paul repeated the question.

"I've been thinking," said Tarvish. "Trying to find the words in your mind. But they aren't there. Your words make too sharp a distinction between matter and energy. If I say 'a spaceship', you will think of a metal structure. If I say 'a force field', you will picture me traveling in something immaterial. Both are wrong."

"Let's try again. Why did you —" Paul stopped abruptly.

The nose twitched. "No," said Tarvish gently, "I am not the advance guard of an invasion and you are not betraying your race by being human to me. Please forget your science-fiction friends. We men of Earth have no desire to take over any of the planets of this star; ever since our terrible experience with the —" it sounded a little like *Khrj* "— we have made it a firm rule never to land on an inhabited planet."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Because . . ." Tarvish hesitated. A faint blue colored the root of his nose. "Because my girl is here."

"I'm improving," Paul said. "It took me only five seconds to adjust to that *girl*. You're in love?" Oddly, he didn't even feel like smiling.

"That's why I had to land. You see, she went off by herself in the . . . I think if I invent the word 'space dinghy' it will give you the idea. I warned her that the . . . well, an important part was defective; but we had just had a small quarrel and she insisted on spiting me. She never came back. That's why I had to make contact with intelligent life to learn something of the planet which I have to search."

"Only the intelligent life doesn't have waves. Except me because, God help me, I expect strange things to speak. You need a combination of Sherlock Holmes and Frank Buck, and you're stuck with a possibly not quite sane ventriloquist."

"You will help me? When you see her!" Tarvish was almost rapturous. "The most beautiful girl, I swear, on the whole earth. With," he added reminiscently, "the finest pair of ears in the universe." On the word *ears* his voice sank a little, and the blue tinge deepened at the root of his proboscis.

The universe, Paul smiled to

himself, must provide a fascinating variety of significant secondary sexual characteristics. "If I can help you," he said sincerely, "I'll try. I'll do my best. And in the meantime we've the little problem of feeding you. I'll have to take you —" he tensed a little "— home. I suppose, that is, you *do* eat?"

"So far as we have observed," Tarvish pronounced solemnly, "all races of rational beings eat and sleep and . . ." The blue was again intensified.

"And relish a fine pair of ears," Paul concluded for him. "Definition of rationality." He started the car.

By the next morning Paul Peters had learned a number of things.

He had learned that men of Tarvish's race are, as they choose, bipeds or quadrupeds. When they entered the Montgomery Block, that sprawling warren of odd studios where Paul lived, Tarvish had trotted behind him on all fours "because," he said, "it would be less conspicuous," as indeed was true. He was only by a small margin the most unusual of the animal and human companions whom Montgomery Block denizens had brought home, few of whom — including the humans — were at the moment functionally bipedal. But once inside the studio apartment, he seemed to prefer the erect posture.

Between them they had worked out the problem of feeding. The proboscidiferous Tarvish was of course edentate, and accustomed to subsisting on liquids and pap. Milk, raw eggs and tomato juice sufficed him for the time being — a surprisingly simple diet to contain most of the requisite vitamins and proteins. Later Paul planned to lay in a supply of prepared baby foods, and looked forward to the astonishment of the clerk at the nearby chain store who knew him as a resolute bachelor.

Paul had also learned an astonishing amount, considering the relative brevity of the conversation, concerning the planet which was to Tarvish *the earth* — from its socio-economic systems to the fascinating fact that at present fine full, ripe ears were, as any man would prefer, in style, whereas only a generation ago they had been unaccountably minimized and even strapped down. Paul's amused explanation of the analogy on this earth served perhaps as much as anything to establish an easy man-to-man intimacy. Tarvish went so far as to elaborate a plan for introducing gradually inflatable false earlobes on his earth. It was never quite clear to Paul how an edentate being could speak so easily, but he imagined that the power resembled his own professional skill.

All of these strange thoughts

coursed through Paul's head as he lay slowly waking up the next morning; and it was only after several minutes of savoring them that he perceived the wonderful background note that served as their ground-bass. Not since the first difficult instant of entering the apartment had he so much as thought of the corner of the main room in which Chuck Woodchuck lay.

"You know, Tarvish," Paul said as they finished breakfast, "I like you. You're easy to be with."

"Thank you, Paul." The root of the proboscis blushed faintly blue. "I like you too. We could spend happy days simply talking, exchanging, learning to know. . . But there *is* Vishta."

"Vishta?"

"My girl. I dreamed about her last night, Paul. . . ." Tarvish gave a little sigh, rose, and began bipedally to pace the room. "Your earth is enormous, even though the figures you tell me convey no meaning to me. Whatever a square mile means, one hundred and ninety-seven million of them must represent quite an area. There must be some way. . . "

"Look," Paul said. "Before we tackle the problem again, let's try restating it. (A), we must find Vishta. But that doesn't necessarily mean literally, physically, Dr. Livingstone-I-presume *find*, does it? She'll be over the lovers' quarrel by now; she'll want to get back to the — you'll pardon the expression — spaceship. If we can let her know where you are, that's enough, isn't it?"

Tarvish rubbed the tip of his large nose. "I should think so."

"All right. Restate the restatement. (A), get word to Vishta. (B), without revealing your interplanetary presence to the world at large. Both because it's against your mores and because I think it'll cause just too damned much trouble. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

The two sat in silence for perhaps five minutes. Paul alternately cudgeled his brains, and addressed brief prayers to the Holy Ghost for assistance in helping this other creature of God. Meanwhile, his eyes drifted around the apartment, and for a moment rested on the noble two-volume Knopf edition of Poe.

"My God in Heaven!" he exclaimed. The most devout could not have considered this a violation of the decalog. "Look, Tarvish. We have in our literature a story called *The Purloined Letter*. Its point is that the most overobvious display can be the subtlest concealment."

"The point occurs in our folklore as well," said Tarvish. "But I don't —" Suddenly he stopped.

Paul grinned. "Did you get a wave? But let me go on out loud — this race is happier that way. Yes, we had it all solved yesterday

and let it slip. The lie we bribed Tim to tell —"

"— that I am your new dummy," Tarvish picked up eagerly. "The act'll be sensational. Because you can really talk, I can do anything. Eat soda crackers while you're talking — it won't make any difference. And you — I hate like hell to say this to any man, but from an audience viewpoint it's true — you're *cute*. You're damned near cuddly. They'll love you. And we bill you with the precise truth: you're a visitant from outer space. It ties a ventriloquism act into the science-fiction trend in TV. You're THE STAR DUMMY. We'll make a fortune — not that I'm thinking of that —"

"Aren't you?" Tarvish asked dryly.

Paul smiled. "Can anyone be a hypocrite in a telepathic civilization?"

"It's been known to happen."

"Well, anyway, I'm not thinking *primarily* of the fortune. We'll get publicity we couldn't buy. And wherever she is, unless it's in Darkest Africa or behind the Iron Curtain, Vishta'll learn where you are."

"Paul," said Tarvish solemnly, "you're inspired. On that I could use a drink."

"Another custom of all rational races?"

"Nearly all. But just a moment: I find in your mind the concept *alcohol*. I'm afraid that doesn't convey much."

Paul tried to think back to his high-school chemistry. Finally he ventured, "C_2H_5OH. That help any?"

"Ah, yes. More correctly, of course, CH_3CH_2OH. You find that mild fluid stimulating? We use it somewhat in preparing food, but . . . Now, if I might have a little $C_8H_{10}N_4O_2$?"

Paul rubbed his head. "Doesn't mean a thing to me. Sounds like some kind of alkaloid. It's the touch of nitrogen that does it with you people?"

"But indeed you do know it. You were drinking it at breakfast. And I must say I admired the ease with which you put away so much strong liquor so early in the day."

Hastily Paul checked in a dictionary. "*Caffein*," he groaned. "And what do you use to sober up? A few cups of good straight alcohol, no cream?"

And in copious shots of C_2H_5OH and $C_8H_{10}N_4O_2$ the two men pledged the future of THE STAR DUMMY.

So now you see at last to what this story has been leading. What began in a confessional and passed through an analyst's office to a zoo — all symbolism is read into the sequence at your own peril — is in actuality the backstage story of the genesis of your own favorite television program.

Most of the rest of that genesis you know from a thousand enthusiastic recountings, from John Crosby's in the *Herald Tribune* to Phillip Hamburger's in the *New Yorker:* how network producers at first greeted Paul Peters skeptically when he returned to show business, after a mysterious absence, with a brand-new type of act; how THE STAR DUMMY was at first somewhat hesitantly showcased on *San Francisco Presents;* how the deluge of fan mail caused that first showing to be kinnied all over the country, while the next week a live performance shot over the nation on micro-wave relay; how the outrageous concept of a cuddlesome dummy from Outer Space managed unbelievably to combine the audiences of Charlie McCarthy and *Space Cadet;* how Star Dummies outgrossed the combined total sales of Sparkle Plenty dolls and Hopalong Cassidy suits.

"Persistent cuss, isn't he?"

But there are a few untold backstage scenes which you should still hear.

Scene: Station KMNX-TV. Time: the morning after the first Star Dummy broadcast. Speaker: a vice-president.

"But my God, M.N., there's all hell popping. That was Hollywood on the phone. They've got the same damned show lined up for show-casing next week. Same format — identical dummy — only maybe theirs has bigger ears. The property owner's flying up here and our lawyers had better be good!"

Scene: Same. Time: that afternoon.

"I think," Paul had said, "that we might be able to reach a settlement out of court." The vice-presidents had filed out eagerly, the lawyers somewhat reluctantly.

Once he had been introduced to Vishta (and so close had he come, in weeks of preparing the show, to Tarvish's ways of thinking that he found her enchantingly lovely), it would have been inconceivable rude and prying to do anything but turn his back on the reunion of the lovers. Which meant that he had to keep his

eyes on Marcia Judd, property owner of the Hollywood show.

"I'm not a professional ventriloquist like you, Mr. Peters," she was saying. "I couldn't do a thing without Vishta. But when we talked about it, it seemed the most logical way to let Tarvish know where she was. You know, like *The Purloined Letter*."

"And you have waves?" Paul marveled. It was about the only thing which she did not obviously have on first glance.

"I guess maybe it's because I write fantasy and stf. Oh, I don't sell much, but a little. And I'm not too sure that there's *anything* that can't happen. So when I was walking through the San Diego zoo and I saw something in with the koalas that was making diagrams . . . Well, I couldn't help remembering Joe's story about inter-cultural communication —"

"Joe Henderson? You know old Joe?"

"He's helped me a lot. I guess you'd sort of say I'm his protegee."

"So long," Paul smiled, "as he isn't your protector. But tell me, does Joe still . . ."

And one half of the room was as happy in the perfect chatter of a first meeting as was the other half in the perfect silence of a long-delayed reunion.

Truth had shifted again, and THE STAR DUMMY was in fact a dummy — a brilliantly constructed piece of mechanism which had eaten up the profits of the three shows on which Tarvish himself appeared. But the show was set now, and Paul's own professional skill could carry it from this point on. And the highly telegenic presence of Marcia Judd did no harm.

Paul's car stopped by a lonely stretch of beach south of the city.

"We can find what you like to call the spaceship from here," said Tarvish. "I'd sooner you didn't see it. I think it would only confuse you."

"We love you both," said Vishta gently. "God bless you."

"God!" Marcia exclaimed. "Don't tell me people with a science like yours believe in God!"

Paul sighed. "I hope you don't mind too much that I'm such a barbarian."

"It's your conditioning," said Marcia. "But with them . . !"

"And *your* conditioning, Marcia," Tarvish observed, "has driven you the other way? Yes, I do believe in God in a way — if less devoutly than Paul, or at least than Paul being devout. Many do on our earth; not all, but many. There was once a man, or possibly more than a man. We argue about that. His name was Hraz, and some call him the Oiled One." Marcia smiled and Tarvish added, "It refers to a ceremony of honor. I am not quite a follower

of Hraz, and yet when I pray — as I did, Paul, shortly before you found me — it is in words that Hraz taught us."

"Which are?"

"We'll say them together," said Vishta. "It makes a good good-bye."

And the lovers recited:

Lifegiver over us, there is blessing in the word that means you. We pray that in time we will live here under your rule as others now live with you there; but in the meantime feed our bodies, for we need that here and now. We are in debt to you for everything, but your love will not hold us accountable for this debt; and so we too should deal with others, holding no man to strict balances of account. Do not let us meet temptations stronger than we can bear; but let us prevail and be free of evil.

Then they were gone, off down the beach.

Marcia sniffled away a tear. "It is *not* the prayer," she protested indignantly. "But they were so *nice*. . . ."

"Yes," said the Paulist at Old St. Mary's, "you may tell your fiancée to come in next Thursday at three to start her pre-marital instruction."

"You'll find her a tartar, Father," Paul grinned.

"Atheism can be the most fanatical of religions. Thank Heaven my duty is only to inform, not to convert her. I'm glad you're getting married, Paul. I don't think anything inside or outside of you will denounce the flesh so violently again. Did the analysis help you?"

"Somehow I never got around to it. Things started happening."

"Now this . . . ah . . . document," the Paulist went on. "Really extraordinary. *Lifegiver over us* . . . Terribly free, of course, but still an unusually stimulating, fresh translation of the *Pater Noster*. I've shown it to Father Massini — he was on the Bishops' Committee for the revised translation of the New Testament — and he was delighted. Where on earth did you get it?"

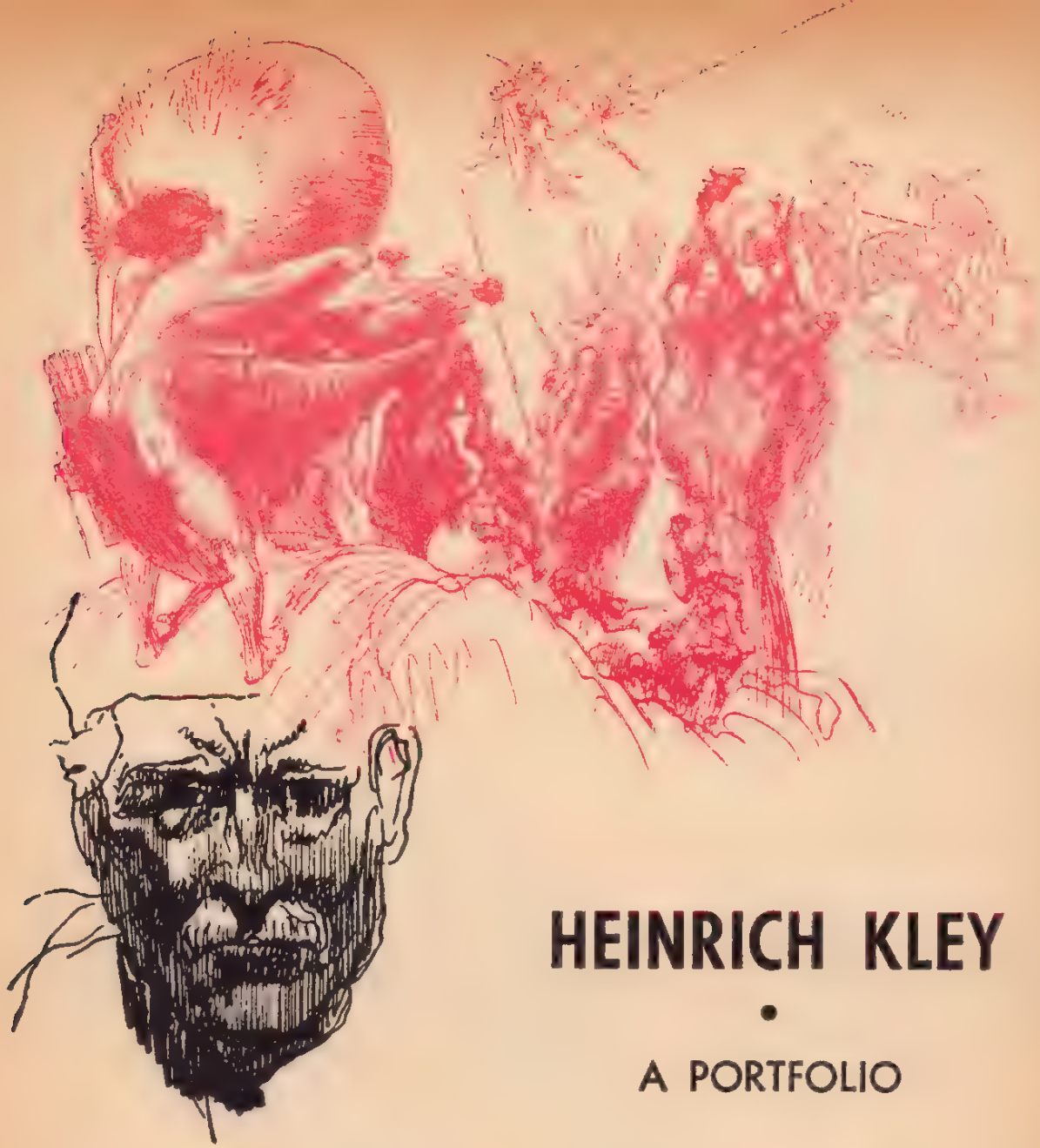
"Father, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"No?" asked the priest.

◆

FROM the April 1900 issue of *Scientific American:* "An automobile recently covered the distance from Coventry to London, 92 miles, in four hours, this being an average of 23 miles an hour."

Pull over, bud. You going to a funeral?



HEINRICH KLEY

•

A PORTFOLIO

It is unlikely that in our lifetime the world will be privileged to carry another artist with a genius for pen drawing comparable to that of Heinrich Kley. His sure, rapid line roped in the grotesque creatures who were at one and the same time inhabitants of the world of his imagination and the prey of his whirling, flying pen. He did not copy things but thought with his hand.

Born in Karlsruhe in 1863, Kley studied art there and in Munich, painting murals, still life and portraits. In 1900 he turned to the mine, shipyard and factory for his subjects; and it was not until 1908 that he began to do his famous satirical drawings, such as are presented on the following pages. He died in 1945.

Courtesy Borden Publishing Company

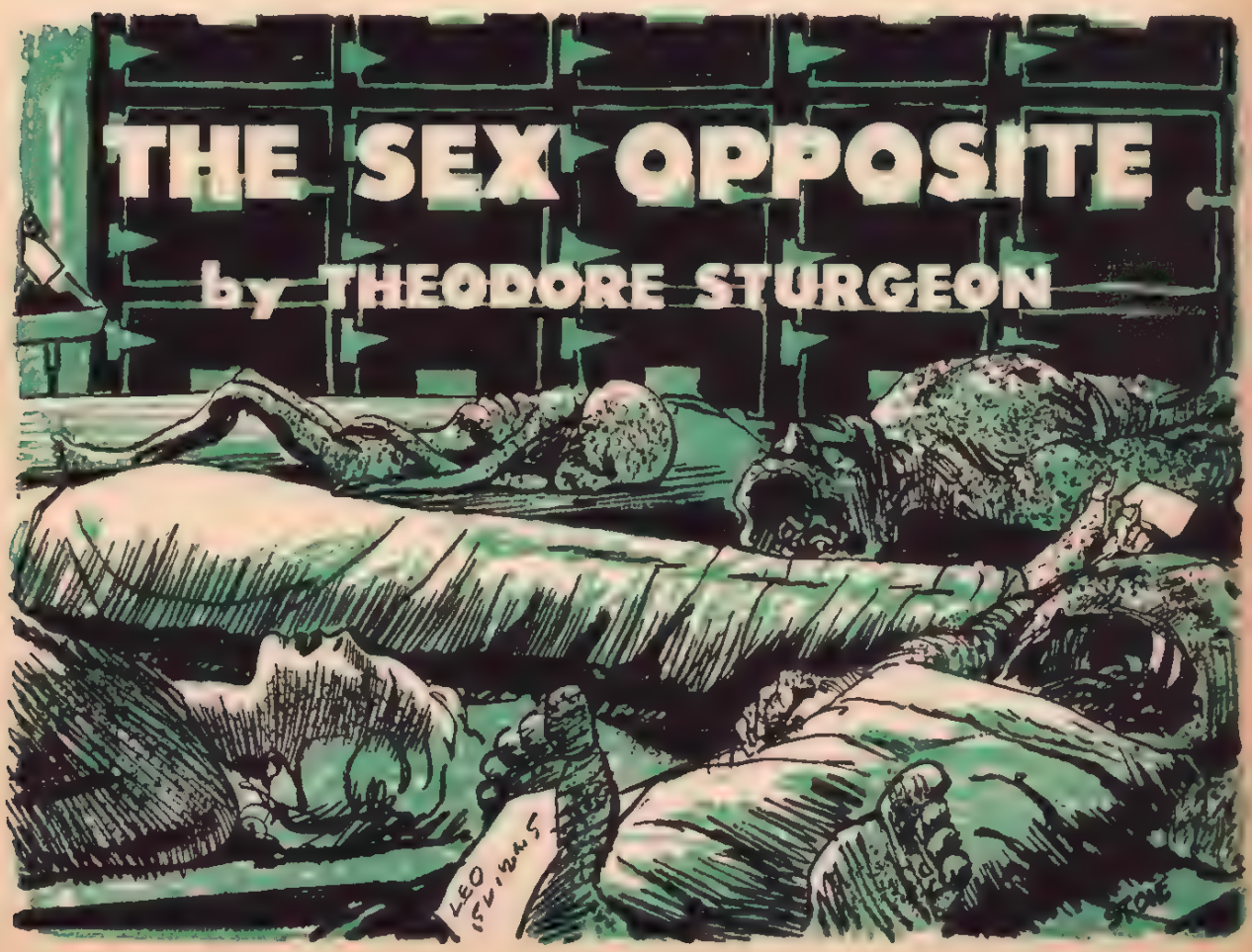
Illustrator: David Stone

Someone once said that Theodore Sturgeon has only one real story to tell, but that he tells it so well editors will go on buying it forever. Don't you believe it! The basis for such a remark comes from the author's variations on a single theme: Somewhere in the universe are alien beings that can help man to gain his rightful heritage.

If all this sounds too esoteric, don't let us mislead you. The Sex Opposite opens with the murder of two lovers in a night-shrouded park and ends with a triple slaying on a street corner. And out of it comes the tender story of a young couple who might never have found love had not death pointed out the way. . . .

BUDGIE slid into the laboratory without knocking, as usual. She was flushed and breathless, her eyes bright with speed and eagerness. "Whatcha got, Muley?"

Muhlenberg kicked the morgue door shut before Budgie could get in line with it. "Nothing," he said flatly, "and of all the people I don't want to see — and at the



moment that means all the people there are — you head the list. Go away."

Budgie pulled off her gloves and stuffed them into an oversized shoulder-bag, which she hurled across the laboratory onto a work-surface. "Come on, Muley. I saw the meat-wagon outside. I know what it brought, too. That double murder in the park. Al told me."

"Al's jaw is one that needs more tying up than any of the stiffs he taxis around," said Muhlenberg bitterly. "Well, you're not getting near this pair."

She came over to him, stood very close. In spite of his annoyance, he couldn't help noticing how soft and full her lips were just then. *Just then* — and the sudden realization added to the annoyance. He had known for a long time that Budgie could turn on mechanisms that made every one of a man's ductless glands purse up its lips and blow like a trumpet. Every time he felt it he hated himself. "Get away from me," he growled. "It won't work."

"What won't, Muley?" she murmured.

Muhlenberg looked her straight in the eye and said something about his preference for raw liver over Budgie-times-twelve.

The softness went out of her lips, to be replaced by no particular hardness. She simply laughed good-naturedly. "All right, you're immune. I'll try logic."

"Nothing will work," he said. "You will not get in there to see those two, and you'll get no details from me for any of that *couche-con-carne* stew you call a newspaper story."

"Okay," she said surprisingly. She crossed the lab and picked up her handbag. She found a glove and began to pull it on. "Sorry I interrupted you, Muley. I do get the idea. You want to be alone."

His jaw was too slack to enunciate an answer. He watched her go out, watched the door close, watched it open again, heard her say in a very hurt tone, "But I do think you could tell me *why* you won't say anything about this murder."

He scratched his head. "As long as you behave yourself, I guess I do owe you that." He thought for a moment. "It's not your kind of a story. That's about the best way to put it."

"Not my kind of a story? A double murder in Lover's Lane? The maudlin mystery of the mugger, or mayhem in Maytime? No kidding, Muley — you're not serious!"

"Budgie, this one isn't for fun. It's ugly. Very *damn* ugly. And it's serious. It's mysterious for a number of other reasons than the ones you want to siphon into your readers."

"What other reasons?"

"Medically. Biologically. Sociologically."

"My stories got biology. Sociology they got likewise; stodgy truisms about social trends is the way I dish up sex in the public prints, or didn't you know? So — that leaves medical. What's so strange medically about this case?"

"Good night, Budge."

"Come on, Muley. You can't horrify *me*."

"That I know. You've trod more primrose pathology in your research than Krafft-Ebing plus eleven comic books. No, Budgie. No more."

"Dr. F. L. Muhlenberg, brilliant young biologist and special medical consultant to the City and State Police, intimated that these aspects of the case — the brutal murder and disfigurement of the embarrassed couple — were superficial compared with the unspeakable facts behind them. 'Medically mysterious', he was quoted as saying." She twinkled at him. "How's that sound?" She looked at her watch. "And I can make the early edition, too, with a head. Something like DOC SHOCKED SPEECHLESS — and a subhead: Lab Sleuth Suppresses Medical Details of Double Park Killing. Yeah, and your picture."

"If you dare to print anything of the sort," he raged, "I'll —"

"All right, all right," she said conciliatingly. "I won't. I really won't."

"Promise me?"

"I promise, Muley . . . *if* —"

"Why should I bargain?" he demanded suddenly. "Get out of here."

She began to close the door. "And something for the editorial page," she said. "Is a doctor within his rights in suppressing information concerning a murderous maniac and his methods?" She closed the door.

Muhlenberg bit his lower lip so hard he all but yelped. He ran to the door and snatched it open. "Wait!"

Budgie was leaning against the doorpost lighting a cigarette. "I *was* waiting," she said reasonably.

"Come in here," he grated. He snatched her arm and whirled her inside, slamming the door.

"You're a brute," she said, rubbing her arm and smiling dazzlingly.

"The only way to muzzle you is to tell you the whole story. Right?"

"Right. If I get an exclusive when you're ready to break the story."

"There's probably a kicker in that, too," he said morosely. He glared at her. Then, "Sit down," he said.

She did. "I'm all yours."

"Don't change the subject," he said with a ghost of his natural humor. He lit a thoughtful cigarette. "What do you know about this case so far?"

"Too little," she said. "This couple were having a conversation without words in the park when some muggers jumped them and killed them, a little more gruesomely than usual. But instead of being delivered to the city morgue, they were brought straight to you on the orders of the ambulance interne after one quick look."

"How did you know about it?"

"Well, if you must know, I was in the park. There's a short-cut over by the museum, and I was about a hundred yards down the path when I . . ."

Muhlenberg waited as long as tact demanded, and a little longer. Her face was still, her gaze detached. "Go on."

". . . when I heard a scream," she said in the precise tone of voice which she had been using. Then she began to cry.

"Hey," he said. He knelt beside her, put a hand on her shoulder. She shoved it away angrily, and covered her face with the damp towel. When she took it down again she seemed to be laughing. She was doing it so badly that he turned away in very real embarrassment.

"Sorry," she said in a very shaken whisper. "It . . . was that kind of a scream. I've never heard anything like it. It did something to me. It had more agony in it than a single sound should be able to have." She closed her eyes.

"Man or woman?"

She shook her head.

"So," he said matter-of-factly, "what did you do then?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, for I don't know how long." She slammed a small fist down on the table. "I'm supposed to be a reporter!" she flared. "And there I stand like a dummy, like a wharf-rat in concussion-shock!" She wet her lips. "When I came around I was standing by a rock wall with one hand on it." She showed him. 'Broke two perfectly good fingernails, I was holding on so tight. I ran toward where I'd heard the sound. Just trampled brush, nothing else. I heard a crowd milling around on the avenue. I went up there. The meat-wagon was there, Al and that young sawbones Regal — Ruggles —"

"Regalio."

"Yeah, him. They'd just put those two bodies into the ambulance. They were covered with blankets. I asked what was up. Regalio waved a finger and said 'Not for school-girls' and gave me a real death-mask grin. He climbed aboard. I grabbed Al and asked him what was what. He said muggers had killed this couple, and it was pretty rugged. Said Regalio had told him to bring them here, even before he made a police report. They were both about as upset as they could get."

"I don't wonder," said Muhlenberg.

"Then I asked if I could ride and they said no and took off. I grabbed a cab when I found one to grab, which was all of fifteen minutes later, and here I am. Here I am," she repeated, "getting a story out of you in the damndest way yet. You're asking, I'm answering." She got up. "You write the feature, Muley. I'll go on into your icebox and do your work."

He caught her arm. "Nah! No you don't! Like the man said—it's not for school-girls."

"Anything you have in there *can't* be worse than my imagination!" she snapped.

"Sorry. It's what you get for barging in on me before I've had a chance to think something through. You see, this wasn't exactly two people."

"I know!" she said sarcastically. "Siamese twins."

He looked at her distantly. "Yes. 'Tain't funny, kiddo."

For once she had nothing to say. She put one hand slowly up to her mouth and apparently forgot it, for there it stayed.

"That's what's so ugly about this. Those two were . . . torn apart." He closed his eyes. "I can just see it. I wish I couldn't. Those thugs drifting through the park at night, out for anything they could get. They hear something . . . fall right over them . . . I don't know. Then —"

"All right, all right," she whispered hoarsely. "I can hear you."

"But, damn it," he said angrily, "I've been kicking around this field long enough to know every documented case of such a creature. And I just can't believe that one like this could exist without having been written up in some medical journal somewhere. Even if they were born in Soviet Russia, some translation of a report would've appeared somewhere."

"I know Siamese twins are rare. But surely such a birth wouldn't make international headlines!"

"This one would," he said positively. "For one thing, Siamese twins usually bear more anomalies than just the fact that they are attached. They're frequently fraternal rather than identical twins. More often than not one's born more fully developed than the other. Usually when they're born at all they don't live. But these"—

"What's so special?"

Muhlenberg spread his hands. "They're perfect. They're costally joined by a surprisingly small tissue-organ complex —"

"Wait, professor. 'Costally' — you mean at the chest?"

"That's right. And the link is — was — not major. I can't understand why they were never surgically separated. There may be a reason, of course, but that'll have to wait on the autopsy."

"Why wait?"

"It's all I can do to wait." He grinned suddenly. "You see,

you're more of a help than you realize, Budge. I'm dying to get to work on them, but under the circumstances I have to wait until morning. Regalio reported to the police, and I know the coroner isn't going to come around this time of night, not if I could show him quintuplets in a chain like sausages. In addition I don't have identities, I don't have relatives' releases — you know. So — a superficial examination, a lot of wild guesses, and a chance to sound off to you to keep myself from going nuts."

"You're *using* me!"

"That's bad?"

"Yes — when I don't get any fun out of it."

He laughed. "I love those incendiary statements of yours. I'm just not flammable."

She looked at him, up and a little sidewise. "Not at all?"

"Not to you."

She considered that. She looked down at her hands, as if they were the problem of Muhlenberg's susceptibility. She turned the hands over, then nodded. "I think I know why."

"Do tell."

She said, "We have nothing in common. I mean, but *nothing*. We're different to the core, to the bone. You hunt out facts and so do I, but we could never share that because we don't use facts for the same things. You use facts only to find more facts."

"What do you use them for?"

She smiled. "All sorts of things. A good reporter doesn't report just what happens. He reports what he *sees* — in many cases a very different thing. Anyway . . ."

"Wonder how these biological pressures affected our friends here," he mused, thumbing over his shoulder at the morgue.

"About the same, I'd judge, with certain important difficulties. But wait — were they men or women, or one of each?"

"I didn't tell you, did I?" he said, with real startlement.

"No," she said.

He opened his mouth to answer, but could not. The scream came.

It came from downstairs, or outside, or perhaps from nowhere or everywhere, or from a place without a name. It was all around them, inside, behind them in time as well as space. It was the echo of their own first cry when they lost the first warmth and found loneliness, early, as everyone must. It was hurt: some the pain of impact, some of fever and delirium, and some the great pressure of beauty too beautiful to bear. And like pain, it could not be remembered. It lasted as long as it was a sound, and perhaps a little longer, and the frozen time after it died was immeasurable.

Muhlenberg became increas-

ingly conscious of an ache in his calves and in the trapezoid muscles of his back. They sent him a gradual and completely intellectualized message of strain, and very consciously he relieved it and sat down. His movement carried Budgie's arm forward, and he looked down at her hand, which was clamped around his forearm. She moved it away, opening it slowly, and he saw the angry marks of her fingers, and knew they would be bruises in the morning.

She said, "That was the scream. The one I heard. Wasn't once enough?"

It was only then that he could look far enough out of himself to see her face. It was pasty with shock, and wet, and her lips were pale. He leapt to his feet. "Another one! *Come on!*"

He pulled her up and through the door. "Don't you understand?" he blazed. "Another one! It can't be, but somewhere out there it's happened again —"

She pulled back. "Are you sure it wasn't . . ." She nodded at the closed door of the morgue.

"Don't be ridiculous," he snorted. "*They* couldn't be alive." He hurried her to the stairs.

It was very dark. Muhlenberg's office was in an ageing business building which boasted twenty-five-watt bulbs on every other floor. They hurtled through the murk, past the deep-set doorways of the law firm, the doll factory, the import-export firm which imported and exported nothing but phone calls, and all the other dim mosaics of enterprise. The building seemed quite deserted, and but for the yellow-orange glow of the landings and the pathetic little bulbs, there were no lights anywhere. And it was as quiet as it was almost dark; quiet as late night; quiet as death.

They burst out onto the old brownstone steps and stopped, afraid to look, wanting to look. There was nothing. Nothing but the street, a lonesome light, a distant horn and, far up at the corner, the distinct clicking of the relays in a traffic-light standard as they changed an ignored string of emeralds to an unnoticed ruby rope.

"Go up to the corner," he said, pointing. "I'll go down the other way. That noise wasn't far away —"

"No," she said. "I'm coming with you."

"Good," he said, so glad he was amazed at himself. They ran north to the corner. There was no one on the street within two blocks in any direction. There were cars, mostly parked, one coming, but none leaving.

"Now what?" she asked.

For a moment he did not answer. She waited patiently while he listened to the small distant

noises which made the night so quiet. Then, "Good night, Budge."

"Good — *what*!"

He waved a hand. "You can go home now."

"But what about the —"

"I'm tired," he said. "I'm bewildered. That scream wrung me like a floor-mop and pulled me down too many stairs too fast. There's too much I don't know about this and not enough I can do about it. So go home."

"Aw, Muley . . ."

He sighed. "I know. Your story. Budgie, I faithfully promise you I'll give you an exclusive as soon as I have facts I can trust."

She looked carefully at his face in the dim light and nodded at what she saw there. "All right, Muley. The pressure's off. Call me?"

"I'll call you."

He stood watching her walk away. Quite a gal, he thought. They don't come more dynamic. Quite normally gynoid, to boot, if you liked her type. Pity she didn't make him go boing-g-g. He tried to imagine sharing anything deep with her and gave it up. He shrugged and ambled back toward the laboratory, pondering morphology, teratology, and a case where *monstra per defectum* could coexist with *monstra per fabricam alienam*.

Then he saw the light.

It flickered out over the street, soft and warm. He stopped and looked up. The light showed in a third-story window. It was orange and yellow, but with it was a flaring blue-white. It was pretty. It was also in his laboratory. No — not the laboratory. The morgue.

Muhlenberg groaned. After that he saved his breath. He needed it badly by the time he got back to the laboratory.

Muhlenberg dove for the heavy morgue door and snatched it open. A great pressure of heat punted a gout of smoke into the lab. He slammed the door, ran to a closet, snatched out a full-length lab smock, spun the faucets in the sink and soaked the smock. From another cabinet he snatched up two glass-globe fire extinguishers. He wrapped the wet cloth twice around his face and let the rest drop over his chest and back. Cradling the extinguishers in one bent forearm, he reached for the side of the door and grabbed the pump-type extinguisher racked there.

Now, suddenly not hurrying, he stepped up on the sill and stood on tiptoe, peering through a fold of the wet cloth. Then he crouched low and peered again. Satisfied, he stood up and carefully pegged the two glass extinguishers, one straight ahead, one to the right and down. Then he disappeared into the smoke, holding the third extinguisher at the ready.

There was a rising moan, and

the smoke shook like a solid entity and rushed into the room and away. As it cleared, Muhlenberg, head and shoulders wrapped in sooty linen, found himself leaning against the wall, gasping, with one hand on a knife-switch on the wall. A three-foot exhaust fan in the top sash of one window was making quick work of the smoke.

Racks of chemicals, sterilizers, and glass cabinets full of glittering surgeon's tools lined the left wall. Out on the floor were four massive tables, on each of which was a heavy marble top. The rest of the room was taken up by a chemist's bench, sinks, a partitioned-off darkroom with lightproof curtains, and a massive centrifuge.

On one of the tables was a mass of what looked like burned meat and melted animal fat. It smelled bad — not rotten bad, but acrid and — and *wet*, if a smell can be described that way. Through it was the sharp, stinging odor of corrosive chemicals.

He unwound the ruined smock from his face and threw it into a corner. He walked to the table with the mess on it and stood looking bleakly at it for a time. Suddenly he put out a hand, and with thumb and forefinger pulled out a length of bone.

"What a job," he breathed at length.

He walked around the table, poked at something slumped there and snatched his hand away. He went to the bench and got a pair of forceps, which he used to pick up the lump. It looked like a piece of lava or slag. He turned on a hooded lamp and studied it closely.

"Thermite, by God," he breathed.

He stood quite still for a moment, clenching and unclenching his square jaw. He took a long slow turn around the seared horror on the morgue slab, then carefully picked up the forceps and hurled them furiously into a corner. Then he went out to the lab and picked up the phone. He dialled.

"Emergency," he said. "Hello, Sue. Regalio there? Muhlenberg. Thanks. . . . Hello, Doc. Are you sitting down? All right. Now get this. I'm fresh out of symmetrical teratomorphs. They're gone. . . . Shut up and I'll tell you! I was out in the lab talking to a reporter when I heard the damndest scream. We ran out and found nothing. I left the reporter outside and came back. I couldn't've been out more'n ten-twelve minutes. But somebody got in here, moved both stiffs onto one slab, incised them from the thorax to the pubis, crammed them full of iron oxide and granulated aluminum — I have lots of that sort of stuff around here — fused 'em with a couple rolls of magnesium foil and touched 'em off. Made a great big messy thermite bomb out of them.

. . . No, dammit, of *course* there's nothing left of them! What would you think eight minutes at seven thousand degrees would do? . . . Oh, dry up, Regalio! I don't know who did it or why, and I'm too tired to think about it. I'll see you tomorrow morning. No — what would be the use of sending anyone down here? This wasn't done to fire the building; whoever did it just wanted to get rid of these bodies, and sure did a job. . . . The coroner? I don't know what I'll tell him. I'm going to get a drink and then I'm going to bed. I just wanted you to know. Don't tell the press. I'll head off that reporter who was here before. We can do without this kind of story. 'Mystery arsonist cremates evidence of double killing in lab of medical consultant.' A block from headquarters, yet. . . . Yeah, and get your driver to keep his trap shut, too. Okay, Regalio. Just wanted to let you know. . . . Well, you're no sorrier'n I am. We'll just have to wait another couple hundred years while something like that gets born again, I guess."

Muhlenberg hung up, sighed, went into the morgue. He turned off the fan and lights, locked the morgue door, washed up at the laboratory sink, and shut the place up for the night.

It was eleven blocks to his apartment — an awkward distance most of the time, for Muhlenberg was not of the fresh-air and deep-breathing fraternity. Eleven blocks was not far enough to justify a cab and not near enough to make walking a negligible detail. At the seventh block he was aware of an overwhelming thirst and a general sensation that somebody had pulled the plug out of his energy barrel. He was drawn as if by a vacuum into Rudy's, a Mexican bar with Yma Sumac and Villa-Lobos on the juke-box.

"*Olé, amigo,*" said Rudy. "Tonight you don' smile."

Muhlenberg crawled wearily onto a stool. "*Deme una tequila* sour, and skip the cherry," he said in his bastard Spanish. "I don't know what I got to smile about." He froze, and his eyes bulged. "Come back here, Rudy."

Rudy put down the lemon he was slicing and came close. "I don't want to point, but who *is* that?"

Rudy glanced at the girl. "*Ay,*" he said rapturously. "*Que chuchin.*"

Muhlenberg remembered vaguely that *chuchin* was untranslatable, but that the closest English could manage with it was "cute". He shook his head. "That won't do." He held up his hand. Don't try to find me a Spanish word for it. There isn't any word for it. Who is she?"

Rudy spread his hands. "*No sé.*"

"She by herself?"

"*Si.*"

Muhlenberg put his chin on his hand. "Make my drink. I want to think."

Rudy went, his mahogany cheeks drawn in and still in his version of a smile.

Muhlenberg looked at the girl in the booth again just as her gaze swept past his face to the bartender. "Rudy!" she called softly, "are you making a tequila sour?"

"*Si, senorita.*"

"Make me one too?"

Rudy beamed. He did not turn his head toward Muhlenberg, but his dark eyes slid over toward him, and Muhlenberg knew that he was intensely amused. Muhlenberg's face grew hot, and he felt like an idiot. He had a wild fantasy that his ears had turned forward and snapped shut, and that the cello-and-velvet sound of her voice, captured, was nestling down inside his head like a warm little animal.

He got off the bar stool, fumbled in his pocket for change and went to the juke-box. She was there before him, slipping a coin in, selecting a strange and wonderful recording called *Vene A Mi Casa*, which was a *borracho* version of "C'mon-a My House".

"I was just going to play that!" he said. He glanced at the juke box. "Do you like Yma Sumac?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Do you like *lots* of Yma Sumac?" She smiled and, seeing it, he bit his tongue. He dropped in a quarter and punched out six sides of Sumac. When he looked up Rudy was standing by the booth with a little tray on which were two tequila sours. His face was utterly impassive and his head was tilted at the precise angle of inquiry as to where he should put Muhlenberg's drink. Muhlenberg met the girl's eyes, and whether she nodded ever so slightly or whether she did it with a single movement of her eyelids, he did not know, but it meant "yes". He slid into the booth opposite her.

Music came. Only some of it was from the records. He sat and

listened to it all. Rudy came with a second drink before he said anything, and only then did he realize how much time had passed while he rested there, taking in her face as if it were quite a new painting by a favorite artist. She did nothing to draw his attention or to reject it. She did not stare rapturously into his eyes or avoid them. She did not even appear to be waiting, or expecting anything of him. She was neither remote nor intimate. She was close, and it was good.

He thought, in your most secret dreams you cut a niche in yourself, and it is finished early, and then you wait for someone to come along to fill it — but to fill it exactly, every cut, curve, hollow and plane of it. And people do come along, and one covers up the niche, and another rattles around inside it, and another is so surrounded by fog that for the longest time you don't know if she fits or not; but each of them hits you with a tremendous impact. And then one comes along and slips in so quietly that you don't know when it happened, and fits so well you almost can't feel anything at all. And that is it.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked him.

He told her, immediately and fully. She nodded as if he had been talking about cats or cathedrals or cam-shafts, or anything else beautiful and complex. She said "That's right. It isn't all there is, of course. It isn't even enough. But everything else isn't enough without it."

"What is 'everything else'?"

"You know," she said.

He thought he did. He wasn't sure. He put it aside for later. "Will you come home with me?"

"Oh, yes."

They got up. She stood by the door, her eyes full of him, while he went to the bar with his wallet. "*¿Cuánto le debo?*"

Rudy's eyes had a depth he had never noticed before. Perhaps it hadn't been there before. "*Nada*," said Rudy.

"On the house? *Muchissimo gracias, amigo.*" He knew, profoundly, that he shouldn't protest.

They went to his apartment. While he was pouring brandy — brandy because, if it's good brandy, it marries well with tequila — she asked him if he knew of a place called Shake's, down in the warehouse district. He thought he did; he knew he could find it. "I want to meet you there tomorrow night at eight," she said. "I'll be there," he smiled. He turned to put the brandy carafe back, full of wordless pleasure in the knowledge that all day tomorrow he could look forward to being with her again.

He played records. He was part sheer technician, part delighted

child when he could demonstrate his sound system. He had a copy of the Confucian "Analects" in a sandalwood box. It was printed on rice-paper and hand-illuminated. He had a Finnish dagger with intricate scrollwork which, piece by piece and as a whole, made many pictures. He had a clock made of four glass discs, the inner two each carrying one hand, and each being rim-driven from the base so it seemed to have no works at all.

She loved all these things. She sat in his biggest chair while he stared out at the blue dark hours and she read aloud to him from "The Crock of Gold" and from Thurber and Shakespeare for laughter, and from Shakespeare and William Morris for a good sadness.

She sang, once.

Finally she said, "It's bedtime. Go and get ready."

He got up and went into the bedroom and undressed. He showered and rubbed himself pink. Back in the bedroom, he could hear the music she had put on the phonograph. It was the second movement of Prokofiev's "Classical" Symphony, where the orchestra is asleep and the high strings tiptoe in. It was the third time she had played it. He sat down to wait until the record was over, and when it was, and she didn't come or speak to him, he went to the living-room door and looked in.

She was gone.

He stood absolutely still and looked around the room. The whole time she had been there she had unostentatiously put everything back after they had looked at it. The amplifier was still on. The phonograph was off, because it shut itself off. The record album of the Prokofiev, standing edge-up on the floor by the amplifier, was waiting to receive the record that was still on the turntable.

He stepped into the room and switched off the amplifier. He was suddenly conscious that in doing so he had removed half of what she had left there. He looked down at the record album; then, without touching it, he turned out the lights and went to bed.

You'll see her tomorrow, he thought.

He thought, you didn't so much as touch her hand. If it weren't for your eyes and ears, you'd have no way of knowing her.

A little later something deep within him turned over and sighed luxuriously. Muhlenberg, it said to him, do you realize that not once during that entire evening did you stop and think: this is an Occasion, this is a Great Day? Not once. The whole thing was easy as breathing.

As he fell asleep he remembered he hadn't even asked her her name.

He awoke profoundly rested, and looked with amazement at his

alarm clock. It was only eight, and after what he had been through at the lab last night, plus what he had drunk, plus staying up so late, this feeling was a bonus indeed. He dressed quickly and got down to the lab early. The phone was already ringing. He told the coroner to bring Regalio and to come right down.

It was all very easy to explain in terms of effects; the burned morgue room took care of that. They beat causes around for an hour or so without any conclusion. Since Muhlenberg was so close to the Police Department, though not a member of it, they agreed to kill the story for the time being. If relatives or a carnival owner or somebody came along, that would be different. Meantime, they'd let it ride. It really wasn't so bad.

They went away, and Muhlenberg called the paper.

Budgie had not come to work or called. Perhaps she was out on a story, the switchboard suggested.

The day went fast. He got the morgue cleaned up and a lot done on his research project. He didn't begin to worry until the fourth time he called the paper — that was about five p.m. — and Budgie still hadn't come or called. He got her home phone number and called it. No; she wasn't there. She'd gone out early to work. Try her at the paper.

He went home and bathed and changed, looked up the address of Shank's and took a cab there. He was much too early. It was barely seven-fifteen.

Shank's was a corner bar of the old-fashioned type with plate-glass windows on its corner fronts and flyblown wainscoting behind them. The three-corner booths gave a view of the corner, and the corner did the same for the booths. Except for the corner blaze of light, the rest of the place was in darkness, punctuated here and there by the unreal blues and greens of beer signs in neon script.

Muhlenberg glanced at his watch when he entered, and was appalled. He knew now that he had been artificially busier and busier as the day wore on, and that it was only a weak effort to push aside the thoughts of Budgie and what might have happened to her. His busyness had succeeded in getting him into a spot where he would have nothing to do but sit and wait, and think his worries through.

He chose a booth on the mutual margins of the cave-like darkness and the pallid light, and ordered a beer.

If Mr. X were really interested in suppressing information about the two pathetic halves of the murdered monster in the park, he'd only done part of the job. Regalio, Al, Budgie and Muhlen-

berg knew about it. Regalio and Al had been all right when he had seen them this morning, and certainly no attempts had been made on him. On the other hand, he had been in and around the precinct station and its immediate neighborhood all day, and about the same thing applied to the ambulance staff.

But Budgie . . .

Not only was she vulnerable, she wasn't even likely to be missed for hours by anyone since she was so frequently out on stories. Stories! Why — as a reporter she presented the greatest menace of all to anyone who wanted to hide information!

With that thought came its corollary: Budgie was missing, and if she had been taken care of he, Muhlenberg, was next on the list. Had to be. He was the only one who had been able to take a good long look at the bodies. He was the one who had given the information to the reporter and the one who still had it to give. In other words, if Budgie had been taken care of, he could expect some sort of attack too, and quickly.

He looked around the place with narrowing eyes. This was a rugged section of town. Why was he here?

He had a lurching sense of shock and pain. The girl he'd met last night — that couldn't be a part of this thing. It mustn't be. And yet because of her he found himself here, like a sitting duck.

He suddenly understood his unwillingness to think about the significance of Budgie's disappearance.

"Oh, no," he said aloud.

Should he run?

Should he — and perhaps be wrong? He visualized the girl coming there, waiting for him, perhaps getting in some trouble in this dingy place, just because he'd gotten the wind up over his own fantasies.

He couldn't leave. Not until after eight anyway. What else then? If they got him, who would be next? Regalio, certainly. Then Al. Then the coroner himself.

Warn Regalio. That at least he might do, before it was too late. He jumped up.

There was, of course, someone in the phone booth. A woman. He swore and pulled the door open.

"*Budgie!*"

He reached in almost hysterically, pulled her out. She spun limply into his arms, and for an awful split second his thoughts were indescribable. Then she moved. She squeezed him, looked up incredulously, squeezed him again. "Muley! Oh, Muley, I'm so glad it's you!"

"Budgie, you lunkhead — where've you been?"

"Oh, I've had the most awful — the most wonderful —"

"Hey, yesterday you cried.

Isn't that your quota for the year?"

"Oh, shut up. Muley, Muley, no one could get mixed up more than I've been!"

"Oh," he said reflectively, "I dunno. Come on over here. Sit down. Bartender! Two double whisky sodas!" Inwardly, he smiled at the difference in a man's attitude toward the world when he has something to protect. "Tell me." He cupped her chin. "First of all, where have you been? You had me scared half to death."

She looked up at him, at each of his eyes in turn. There was a beseeching expression in her whole pose. "You won't laugh at me, Muley?"

"Some of this business is real un-funny."

"Can I really *talk* to you? I never tried." She said, as if there were no change of subject, "You don't know who I am."

"Talk then, so I'll know."

"Well," she began, "it was this morning. When I woke up. It was such a beautiful day! I went down to the corner to get the bus. I said to the man at the newsstand, "Post?" and dropped my nickel in his cup, and right in chorus with me was this man . . ."

"This man," he prompted.

"Yes. Well, he was a young man, about — oh, I don't know how old. Just right, anyway. And the newsdealer didn't know who to give the paper to because he had only one left. We looked at each other, this fellow and I, and laughed out loud. The newsy heard my voice loudest, I guess, or was being chivalrous, and he handed the paper to me. The bus came along then and we got in, and the fellow, the young one, I mean, he was going to take a seat by himself but I said come on — help me read the paper — you helped me buy it."

She paused while the one-eyed bartender brought the drinks.

"We never did look at the paper. We sort of . . . talked. I never met anyone I could talk to like that. Not even you, Muley, even now when I'm trying so. The things that came out . . . as if I'd known him all my — no," she said, shaking her head violently, "not even like that. I don't know. I can't say. It was fine.

"We crossed the bridge and the bus ran alongside the meadow, out there between the park and the fairgrounds. The grass was too green and the sky was too blue and there was something in me that just wanted to explode. But good, I mean, good. I said I was going to play hookey. I didn't say I'd like to, or I felt like it. I said I was going to. And he said let's, as if I'd asked him, and I didn't question that, not one bit. I don't know where he was going or what he was giving up, but we pulled the cord and the bus stopped and

we got out and headed cross country."

"What did you do all day?" Muhlenberg asked as she sipped.

"Chased rabbits. Ran. Lay in the sun. Fed ducks. Laughed a lot. Talked. Talked a *whole* lot." Her eyes came back to the present, back to Muhlenberg. "Gosh, I don't know, Muley. I tried to tell myself all about it after he left me. I couldn't. Not so I'd believe it if I listened."

"And all this wound up in a crummy telephone booth?"

She sobered instantly. "I was supposed to meet him here. I couldn't just wait around home. I couldn't stomach the first faint thought of the office. So I just came here.

"I sat down to wait. I don't know why he asked me to meet him in a place like — what on earth is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," choked Muhlenberg. "I was having an original thought called 'It's a small world.'" He waved her forthcoming questions away. "Don't let me interrupt. You first, then me. There's something weird and wonderful going on here."

"Where was I? Oh. Well, I sat here waiting and feeling happy, and gradually the feeling went away and the gloom began to seep in. Then I thought about you, and the murder in the park, and that fantastic business at your lab last night, and I began to get scared. I didn't know what to do. I was going to run from here, and then I had a reaction, and wondered if I was just scaring myself. Suppose he came and I wasn't here? I couldn't bear that. Then I got scared again and — and wondered if he was part of the whole thing, the Siamese-twin murder and all. And I hated myself for even thinking such a thing. I went into a real hassel. At last I squared myself away and figured the only thing to do was to call you up. And you weren't at the lab. And the coroner didn't know where you'd gone and — oh-h-h, *Muley!*"

"It meant that much?"

She nodded.

"Fickle bitch! Minutes after leaving your lover-boy —"

She put her hand over his mouth. "Watch what you say," she said fiercely. "This was no gay escapade, Muley. This was like — like nothing I've ever heard of. He didn't touch me, or act as if he wanted to. He didn't have to; it wasn't called for. The whole thing *was* the whole thing, and not a preliminary to anything else. It was — it was — oh, *damn* this language!"

Muhlenberg thought about the Prokofiev album standing upright by his amplifier. Damn it indeed, he thought. "What was his name?" he asked gently.

"His —" She snapped her head up, turned slowly to him. She whispered, "I never asked him. . . ."

and her eyes went quite round.

"I thought not." Why did I say that? he asked himself. I almost know. . . .

He said, suddenly, "Budge, do you love him?"

Her face showed surprise. "I hadn't thought about it. Maybe I don't know what love is. I thought I knew. But it was less than this." She frowned. "It was more than this, though, some ways."

"Tell me something. When he left you, even after a day like that, did you feel . . . that you'd lost something?"

She thought about it. "Why . . . no. No, I didn't. I was full up to here, and what he gave me he left with me. That's the big difference. No love's like that. Can you beat that? I didn't *lose* anything!"

He nodded. "Neither did I," he said.

"You *what?*"

But he wasn't listening. He was rising slowly, his eyes on the door.

The girl was there. She was dressed differently, she looked trim and balanced. Her face was the same, though, and her incredible eyes. She wore blue jeans, loafers, a heavy, rather loose sweater, and two soft-collar points gleamed against her neck and chin. Her hair hardly longer than his own, but beautiful, beautiful. . . .

He looked down, as he would have looked away from a great light. He saw his watch. It was eight o'clock. And he became aware of Budge looking fixedly at the figure in the door, her face radiant. "Muley, come on. Come on, Muley. There he is!"

The girl in the doorway saw him then and smiled. She waved and pointed at the corner booth, the one with windows on two streets. Muhlenberg and Budge went to her.

She sat down as they came to her. "Hello. Sit there. Both of you."

Side by side they sat opposite her. Budge stared in open admiration. Muhlenberg stared too, and something in the back of his mind began to grow, and grow, and — "No," he said, incredulously.

"Yes," she said, directly to him. "It's true." She looked at Budge. "She doesn't know yet, does she?"

Muhlenberg shook his head. "I hadn't time to tell her."

"Perhaps you shouldn't," said the girl.

Budge turned excitedly to Muhlenberg. "You know him!"

Muhlenberg said, with difficulty, "I know . . . know—"

The girl laughed aloud. "You're looking for a pronoun."

Budge said, "Muley, what's he mean? Let me in on it."

"An autopsy would have shown it, wouldn't it?" he demanded.

The girl nodded. "Very readily. That was a close call."

Budge looked from one to the other. "Will somebody tell me what in blazes this is all about?"

Muhlenberg met the girl's gaze. She nodded. He put an arm around Budgie. "Listen, girl reporter. Our — our friend here's something . . . something new and different."

"Not new," said the girl. "We've been around for thousands of years."

"Have you now!" He paused to digest that, while Budgie squirmed and protested, "But — but — but —"

"Shush, you," said Muhlenberg, and squeezed her shoulders gently. "What you spent the afternoon with isn't a man, Budgie, any more than what I spent most of the night with was a woman. Right?"

"Right," the girl said.

"And the Siamese twins weren't Siamese twins, but two of our friend's kind who — who —"

"They were in syzygy." An inexpressible sadness was in the smooth, almost contralto, all but tenor voice.

"In what?" asked Budgie.

Muhlenberg spelled it for her. "In some forms of life," he started to explain, "well, the microscopic animal called paramecium's a good example — reproduction is accomplished by fission. The creature elongates, and so does its nucleus. Then the nucleus breaks in two, and one half goes to each end of the animal. Then the rest of the animal breaks, and presto — two paramecia."

"But you — he —"

"Shaddup," he said. "I'm lecturing. The only trouble with reproduction by fission is that it affords no variation of strains. A single line of paramecium would continue to reproduce that way until, by the law of averages, its dominant traits would all be non-survival ones, and bang — no more paramecia. So they have another process to take care of that difficulty. One paramecium rests beside another, and gradually their contacting side walls begin to fuse. The nuclei gravitate toward that point. The side walls then break down, so that the nuclei then have access to one another. The nuclei flow together, mix and mingle, and after a time they separate and half goes into each animal. Then the side walls close the opening, break away from one another, and each animal goes its way.

"That is syzygy. It is in no sense a sexual process, because paramecia have no sex. It has no direct bearing on reproduction either — that can happen with or without syzygy." He turned to their companion. "But I'd never heard of syzygy in the higher forms."

The faintest of smiles. "It's

unique with us, on this planet anyway."

"What's the rest of it?" he demanded.

"Our reproduction? We're parthenogenetic females."

"Y-you're a female?" breathed Budgie.

"A term of convenience," said Muhlenberg. "Each individual has both kinds of sex organs. They're self-fertilizing."

"That's a — a what do you call it? — a hermaphrodite," said Budgie. "Excuse me," she added in a small voice.

Muhlenberg and the girl laughed uproariously; and the magic of that creature was that the laughter couldn't hurt. "It's a very different thing," said Muhlenberg. "Hermaphrodites are human. She — our friend there — isn't."

"You're the humanest thing I ever met in my whole life," said Budgie ardently.

The girl reached across the table and touched Budgie's arm. Muhlenberg suspected that that was the very first physical contact either he or Budgie had yet received from the creature, and that it was a rare thing and a great compliment.

"Thank you," the girl said softly. "Thank you very much for saying that." She nodded to Muhlenberg. "Go on."

"Technically — though I know of no case where it has actually been possible — hermaphrodites can have contact with either sex. But parthenogenetic females won't, can't, and wouldn't. They don't need to. Humans cross strains along with the reproductive process. Parthenogenesis separates the two acts completely." He turned to the girl. "Tell me, how often do you reproduce?"

"As often as we wish to."

"And syzygy?"

"As often as we must. Then — we must."

"And that is —"

"It's difficult. It's like the paramecia's, essentially, but it's infinitely more complex. There's cell meeting and interflow, but in tens and then dozens, hundreds, then thousands of millions of cells. The join begins here —" she put her hand at the approximate location of the human heart — "and extends. But you saw it in those two I burned. You are one of the few human beings who ever have."

"That isn't what I saw," he reminded her gently.

She nodded, and again there was that deep sadness. "That murder was such a stupid, incredible, unexpected thing!"

"Why were they in the park?" he asked, his voice thick with pity. "Why out there, in the open, where some such human slugs could find them?"

"They took a chance, because it was important to them," she said wearily. She looked up, and

her eyes were luminous. "We love the outdoors. We love the earth, the feel and smell of it, what lives from it and in it. Especially then. It was such a deep thicket, such an isolated pocket. It was the merest accident that those — those men found them there. They couldn't move. They were — well, medically you could call it unconscious. Actually, there — there never was a consciousness like the one which comes with syzygy."

"Can you describe it?"

She shook her head slowly, and it was no violation of her complete frankness. "Do you know, you couldn't describe sexuality to me so that I could understand it? I have no — no comparison, no analogies. It —" she looked from one to the other — "it amazes me. In some ways I envy it. I know it is a strife, which we avoid, for we are very gentle. But you have a capacity for enjoying strife, and all the pain, all the misery and poverty and cruelty which you suffer, is the cornerstone of everything you build. And you build more than anyone or anything in the known universe."

Budgie was wide-eyed. "You envy *us? You?*"

She smiled. "Don't you think the things you admire me for are rather commonplace among my own kind? It's just that they're rare in humans."

Muhlenberg said slowly, "Just what is your relationship to humanity?"

"It's symbiotic, of course."

"Symbiotic? You live with us, and us with you, like the cellulose-digesting microbes in a termite? Like the yucca moth, which can eat only nectar from the yucca cactus, which can spread its pollen only through the yucca moth?"

She nodded. "It's purely symbiotic. But it isn't easy to explain. We live on that part of humans which makes them different from animals."

"And in turn —"

"We cultivate it in humans."

"I don't understand that," said Budgie flatly.

"Look into your legends. We're mentioned often enough there. Who were the sexless angels? Who is the streamlined fat boy on your Valentine's Day cards? Where does inspiration come from? Who knows three notes of a composer's new symphony, and whistles the next phrase as he walks by the composer's house? And — most important to you two — who really understands that part of love between humans which is not sexual — because we can understand no other kind? Read your history, and you'll see where we've been. And in exchange we get the building — bridges, yes, and aircraft and soon, now, space-ships. But other kinds of building too. Songs and poetry and this new

thing, this increasing sense of the oneness of all your species. And now it is fumbling toward a United Nations, and later it will grope for the stars; and where it builds, we thrive."

"Can you name this thing you get from us — this thing that is the difference between men and the rest of the animals?"

"No. But call it a sense of achievement. Where you feel that most, you feed us most. And you feel it most when others of your kind enjoy what you build."

"Why do you keep yourselves hidden?" Budgie suddenly asked. "Why?" She wrung her hands on the edge of the table. "You're so beautiful!"

"We have to hide," the other said gently. "You still kill anything that's . . . different."

Muhlenberg looked at that open, lovely face and felt a sickness, and he could have cried. He said, "Don't you ever kill anything?" and then hung his head, because it sounded like a defense for the murdering part of humanity. Because it was.

"Yes," she said very softly, "we do."

"You can *hate* something?"

"It isn't hate. Anyone who hates, hates himself as well as the object of his hate. There's another emotion called righteous anger. That makes us kill."

"I can't conceive of such a thing."

"What time is it?"

"Almost eight-forty."

She raised herself from her booth and looked out to the corner. It was dark now, and the usual crowd of youths had gathered under the street-lights.

"I made appointments with three more people this evening," she said. "They are murderers. Just watch." Her eyes seemed to blaze.

Under the light, two of the youths were arguing. The crowd, but for a prodding yelp or two, had fallen silent and was beginning to form a ring. Inside the ring, but apart from the two who were arguing, was a third — smaller, heavier and, compared with the sharp-creased, bright-tied arguers, much more poorly dressed, in an Eisenhower jacket with one sleeve tattered up to the elbow.

What happened then happened with frightening speed. One of the arguers smashed the other across the mouth. Spitting blood, the other staggered back, made a lightning move into his coat pocket. The blade looked for all the world like a golden fan as it moved in the cyclic pulsations of the street-lamp. There was a bubbling scream, a deep animal grunt, and two bodies lay tangled and twitching on the sidewalk while blood gouted and seeped and defied the sharpness of creases and the colors of ties.

Far up the block a man shouted and a whistle shrilled. Then the street corner seemed to become a great repulsing pole for humans. People ran outward, rayed outward, until, from above, they must have looked like a great splash in mud, reaching out and out until the growing ring broke and the particles scattered and were gone. And then there were only the bleeding bodies and the third one, the one with the tattered jacket, who hovered and stepped and waited and did not know which way to go. There was the sound of a single pair of running feet, after the others had all run off to silence, and these feet belonged to a man who ran fast and ran closer and breathed heavily through a shrieking police whistle.

The youth in the jacket finally turned and ran away, and the policeman shouted once around his whistle, and then there were two sharp reports and the youth, running hard, threw up his hands and fell without trying to turn his face away, and skidded on it and lay still with one foot turned in and the other turned out.

The girl in the dark sweater and blue jeans turned away from the windows and sank back into her seat, looking levelly into the drawn faces across the table. "Those were the men who killed those two in the park," she said in a low voice, "and that is how we kill."

"A little like us," said Muhlenberg weakly. He found his handkerchief and wiped off his upper lip. "Three of them for two of you."

"Oh, you don't understand." she said, and there was pity in her voice. "It wasn't because they killed those two. It was because they pulled them apart."

Gradually, the meaning of this crept into Muhlenberg's awed mind, and the awe grew with it. For here was a race which separated insemination from the mixing of strains, and apart from them, in clean-lined definition, was a third component, a psychic interflow. Just a touch of it had given him a magic night and Budgie an enchanted day; hours without strife, without mixed motives or misinterpretations.

If a human, with all his grossly efficient combination of functions, could be led to appreciate one light touch to that degree, what must it mean to have that third component, pure and in essence, torn apart in its fullest flow? This was worse than any crime could be to a human; and yet, where humans can claim clear consciences while jailing a man for a year for stealing a pair of shoes, these people repay the cruelest sacrilege of all with a quick clean blow. It was removal, not punishment. Punish-

ment was alien and inconceivable to them.

He slowly raised his face to the calm, candid eyes of the girl. "Why have you shown us all this?"

"You needed me," she said simply.

"But you came up to destroy those bodies so no one would know —"

"And I found you two, both needing what the other had, and blind to it. No, not blind. I remember you said that if you ever could really share something, you could be very close." She laughed. "Remember your niche, the one that's finished early and never exactly filled? I told you at the time that it wouldn't be enough by itself if it *were* filled, and anyone completely without it wouldn't have enough either. And you —" She smiled at Budgie. "You never made any secret about what you wanted. And there the two of you were, each wanting what you already had, and ignoring what you needed."

"Headline!" said Budgie, "Common Share Takes Stock."

"Subhead!" grinned Muhlenberg, "Man With A Niche Meets Girl With An Itch."

The girl slid out of the booth. "You'll do," she said.

"Wait! You're not going to leave us! Aren't we ever going to see you again?"

"Not knowingly. You won't remember me, or any of this."

"How can you take away —"

"Shush, Muley. You know she can."

"Yes, I guess she — wait though — wait! You give us all this knowledge just so we'll understand — and then you take it all away again. What good will that do us?"

She turned toward them. It may have been because they were still seated and she was standing, but she seemed to tower over them. In a split second of fugue, he had the feeling that he was looking at a great light on a mountain.

"Why, you poor things — didn't you know? Knowledge and understanding aren't props for one another. Knowledge is a pile of bricks, and understanding is a way of building. Build for me!"

They were in a joint called Shank's. After the triple killing, and the wild scramble to get the story phoned in, they started home.

"Muley," she asked suddenly, "what's syzygy?"

"What on earth made you ask me that?"

"It just popped into my head. What is it?"

"A non-sexual interflow between the nuclei of two animals."

"I never tried that," she said thoughtfully.

"Well, don't until we're married," he said. They began to hold hands while they walked.

Illustrator: Emsh

BEATRICE

BY DEAN EVANS

One day, science-fiction writers tell us, we are to have a brave new world filled with gadgets to do our work, machines to solve our problems. But can technocracy free a man caught in the web of human deceit? As a case in point, Dean Evans tells you the tough-tender story of Mr. Fransic, a subdued little man with a cheating wife. In a way, machines solved Mr. Fransic's problem — solved it with a finality that brooked no argument.

HE WAS a little man, a very little man, and very frail. He was so frail, indeed, that if you held him up bodily to a strong light you might expect to see right through him, bones and all. His name was Willard A. Fransic. He was mild as cheesefood, and his voice — when he spoke, that is — was so soft and so incredibly delicate that the sudden unbelievable sound of it was rather shocking. But gently shocking. Like the sight of a hummingbird flying backwards.

That particular night he reached

his home a bit earlier than usual. As was his secret ritual — if nobody was looking — he paused when he got to the beam of the photoelectric cell artfully concealed in little enclosures under the box hedge before the apartment entrance. He pushed out his chin and threw back his thin shoulders. Then he stepped forward into the beam and raised his eyes pleasurably as the great, cathedral-like ornamental bronze doors of the apartment, activated by the hidden mechanism, swung open very slowly. Very, very ponderously — and just for him alone. He smiled happily. He went through and into the lobby.

"'*Evening, Mr. Fransic, sir!*" rasped out the ID Box over on the right wall. Mr. Fransic turned his head, nodded politely. The ID Box was so designed that, if its radar tentacles touched physical proportions not listed in its remarkable mechanical memory, it would immediately send a little warning over to the elevator doors. And the elevator doors, cooperating, would stubbornly refuse to open to anybody or anything, short of a blowtorch or a molybdenum chisel propelled by a ten-pound sledge in the hands of somebody with a lot of time and a lot of energy to burn. Moreover, if any unauthorized person attempted to meddle with the ID Box itself . . . Mr. Fransic shuddered, thinking about that. On the whole, though, Mr. Fransic approved very highly of the ID Box. Because of the ID Box, no one not wanted could get upstairs into the residences of the tenants. No glib-talking door-to-door men, for instance. No thieves. A wonderful gadget, the ID Box, thought Mr. Fransic.

Mr. Fransic crossed the silent lobby. The elevator doors opened beautifully. Mr. Fransic got in. The doors slid closed.

"Fifth floor, if you please, Arthur," said Mr. Fransic. Of course, he wasn't talking to anybody, for the elevator was entirely supermatic and required no operator. Mr. Fransic was only giving orders to the control dingus on the wall. That was another thing Mr. Fransic liked. He even named it, he liked it so well, and when he uttered the name he always said it with a straight face, not smiling.

The elevator went up like smoke through a cool chimney. The doors went back. Mr. Fransic stepped out and walked down the cheerfully-lighted corridor. He stopped before a mahogany door with "3C" lettered on it in shiny solid gold.

"This is the lord and master," announced Mr. Fransic, playfully, into a small chromium-grilled unit on the door casing. The unit knew he wasn't a fake. The door went back like a mouse scurrying into its hole.

Mr. Fransic stepped into the living room. He took off his hat and aimed it at the tall porcelain figurine of a nude which stood upon the glass-topped coffee table. Then he sighed and shook his head and didn't throw it at all, but hung it up in the closet instead. After that, he rubbed his thin veined hands together, although the evening was pleasantly warm, and called out cheerfully: "Hallooo!"

Nobody answered that. Mr. Fransic stepped across the thick nylo-wool carpet, went around a large easy chair that resembled an upholstered tablespoon; went on by a divan which wasn't quite as long as a pew in the rear of a church, and called out again: "Willard A. Fransic is home, dearest!"

Mr. Fransic blushed faintly, suddenly feeling a little ludicrous. He reached the door of his den, opened it, popped his head in and looked around. There wasn't anybody in the den. He closed the door again, went down a short hall to the kitchen.

"The lord and master, Beatrice," he said, recalling his little witticism into the chrome grillwork on the door. Nobody answered that either.

"Beatrice?" He frowned. Except for automatic appliances which glinted with a merciless white glare, the kitchen was unoccupied.

He turned around, went back down the hall to his wife's bedroom. He opened the door, popped his head through. Empty. He didn't have to pop his head into the adjoining bathroom, for that door yawned widely. He tried the door to his own bedroom. She wasn't there either.

"Probably downtown shopping," he said to himself, half-aloud. "Hasn't gotten home yet."

That thought made Mr. Fransic sad. He closed his bedroom door and went back to the den. He didn't like an empty apartment; empty apartments were the lonesomest things in the world. He went across the den to the built-in bar in the corner. It was a good little bar, all mahogany and solid gold trim. Beatrice had given him that on their first anniversary. It was a wonderful little bar complete with its own supply of soda water, automatic freezer for the ice cubes, and everything that a bar should have. It was a good little bar, and only once had it caused any trouble, and that was about a month ago when the little thing-a-ma-bob on the beer tap had stuck and it wouldn't shut off and half a keg of foaming brew had gone down the drain. But the superintendent of the apartment house, a big, outdoorsy-looking man named Rick Mason, had come up and fixed it right away.

Mr. Fransic smiled at the little bar. He looked at a half-dozen bottles lined up in a neat row. He reached out for the gin bottle. He picked it up.

Something made a sleepy little scratching noise when he did that. And a moment later something inside the bar cabinet said in a cool, feminine voice: "*Uhh-uhh, Willard, that's the gin. Remember what the doctor said about your heart. Better take port wine instead.*"

Beatrice's voice on tape. Mr. Fransic chuckled. A sly little look came into his eyes and he clutched the gin bottle tight up against his tummy like a naughty boy not wanting to give up Mother's precious Wedgwood doodad. Then he cocked his head on one side and stared brightly at the bar cabinet.

"*Uhh-uhh, Willard,*" repeated the cool feminine drawl. "*Remember what the doctor said about your heart. Better take port wine instead.*"

Mr. Fransic chuckled again. "Heck with my heart," he said devilishly. "I crave gin!"

There was a little moment of silence from the bar cabinet while the tape unreeled a blank spot. And then the same voice said, but sounding a little bored this time: "*Very well, Willard, have the gin. Have lots of gin.*"

Mr. Fransic laughed happily. But he didn't take any gin after all, for he really didn't want any to begin with. He put the bottle back in its place on the bar.

But the fun was over. He sighed, feeling suddenly lonely again. He went across the room to his desk and sat down at it. He could kill a few idle minutes by lining up tomorrow's schedule at the office, he thought. He nodded to himself and pressed a button on the side of his desk marked "Future". Something made a humming noise. From a very narrow slot in the top of the desk a little strip of white paper, much like adding-machine paper, began to come out and come toward his reaching fingers. He waited until a little snapping click sounded, then tore the paper off and looked at the typing on it.

He read: *June 23, 1999. Nine-fifteen a.m. Your presence needed board meeting Great Far Western Trust. Urgent.*

Mr. Fransic nodded thoughtfully and stuffed the paper into his breast pocket. The machine inside the desk began to hum once more.

One-thirty p.m. R. D. Rexland, vice-pres. International Metals requests appoint. your office re Argentinian antimony. Advise do.

Mr. Fransic shrugged and stuffed that slip in his pocket with the other. Details. He waited to see if there was anything else. There was.

Personal. Important. Your wife birthday, June 25, 1999.

Mr. Fransic started and ripped out the paper tape. Good heavens! He hadn't picked out a present for her yet. How could he have forgotten? Usually he began thinking about it at least a week ahead of time, but here it was, and only three days off! He blinked very rapidly and tried to think. What could he give her this time? He'd given her everything already, and each year found the job getting harder and harder. Clothes? That one he didn't even consider, Beatrice had more clothes than there were hours in the year to wear them. What then? Jewelry? Same objection there, and besides, her skin was so creamy perfect she needed little jewelry, actually. Well then, what?

He concentrated on it for a long time. And then he had a happy inspiration. Once, a few years back, he had given her some perfume. Not just any perfume, of course; there were but eight other women in the whole world who used this particular perfume. The stuff was hand-compounded by an old Swiss expert in Paris. It had a nice haunting scent to it, but the most intriguing part of it was that it couldn't be copied for it defied chemical analysis. Well, Mr. Fransic reflected, at seven thousand dollars a dram, it should. At seven thousand dollars a dram the stuff should defy a hurricane.

At the time, he had given her a full two ounces, and she had been delighted. He thought about

it, smiling quietly to himself. Delighted? Ah, she had even put her arms around him and kissed him.

He wondered if she needed some more. He got up from the desk, went around it, went quickly across the room and out into the hall and across to his wife's bedroom. He opened the door and sneaked in.

To Mr. Fransic, his wife's bedroom was like a sanctuary where angels trod, perhaps, but surely never mortal man. He looked around it now: it was a hallowed shrine, a place of sacred silence. There against the middle of the left wall — and taking up more than three-quarters of the entire room — was a bed four elephants could have got lonesome in. The headboard was a soft gleam of rich pink satin. A lot of satin went into that headboard — enough satin, almost, to make a rug for the floor, and the floor itself was big enough for nine holes of golf. Across this wide expanse of satin, hand-painted undressed maidens gamboled with indelicate abandon.

Mr. Fransic averted his eyes. He padded noiselessly down the room along one side of the bed. He went on past the open bathroom door. He went around the foot of the bed, his small shoes touching the rug like dust settling in a museum. He came, finally, to a low, crystal-topped vanity that he knew was the holy of holies.

He stared down at expensive jars of cream; weird cut-glass bottles of astringent; boxes of powder so very fine they must have been sifted through the pores of somebody's skin.

Staring nakedly down at them this way, he felt a little guilty. He jerked his eyes here and there trying to pick out from among them the one little two-ounce bottle of perfume for which he was searching. He would recognize the bottle if he saw it, for it was a distinctive bottle if ever there was one. As he remembered it, the bottle was blown in the shape of a calla lily, the perfume being cleverly contained in the broad leaves and gracefully flaring spathe, with a spadix of twenty-two carat gold for a stopper. Mr. Fransic's eyes roved through this lovely enchanted forest of a woman's magic.

Until they came upon the butt of a half-smoked cigar.

For a long long time he didn't breathe. His eyes were wide on the sacrilegious thing as though it were some monstrosity found only in the wildest adumbrations of a disordered dream. He blinked. He carefully lowered his head over it. It was indeed a cigar; even though he didn't smoke himself he knew that much. It had a paper band around it as cigars usually do. He could even read the lettering on the band: *Corona del Lobo*.

Mr. Fransic suddenly felt a little faint. He didn't touch it, he

didn't even look at it again. He slowly turned away and retraced his steps around the bed and over to the door and out to the hall and thence to the living room. He got his hat from the closet. He left the apartment, went down in the elevator. He started to walk across the lobby.

"*Oho, Mr. Fransic!*" rasped the ID Box. "*Going out this evening, sir? Have a good time!*"

Mr. Fransic didn't hear. He went outside, out on the sidewalk. There were two things about that cigar that fed the part of his brain that hadn't gone numb; two things, one of them negative and the other positive. Whoever had been smoking the cigar was not one of his own friends, for none of them smoked cigars. Also, of course, it could not have been a stranger, for obviously such a person wouldn't have gotten by the ID Box. So much for the negative. And the positive: logically, the interloper must have been a resident of the apartment house.

Whatever he might have been and wasn't, whatever it was he lacked in his thin frame, at least this much was true: he had the power of reasoning. Someone not personally known to him, but certainly known to the alert electronic brain in the lobby, had been in his wife's bedroom. Had been smoking a cigar in his wife's bedroom. Beyond that point Mr. Fransic did not allow his thoughts to go.

He walked for a long time. Night fell around him like a heavy dark blanket. Traffic went by — the supermatic taxis that required no driver — but Mr. Fransic was oblivious to his surroundings. He walked as a sleepwalker: without volition or purpose, two snoring feet on the concrete of stunned unreality.

When he finally went home, Beatrice was there.

She was stretched out languorously on the big divan, a long-limbed, curve-hipped sort of a woman with full, rounded breasts and a thinly-veiled look of hunger in dark half-closed eyes. When Mr. Fransic came in, she reached out lazily and crushed a cigarette in a tray next to the tall figurine of the nude on the coffee table. She watched him hang up his hat.

"Large day at the office?" she asked casually. There was something wrong with her voice, something akin to the thing that was wrong with her eyes.

"Hello, my dear," said Mr. Fransic, a little tightly.

"You're late."

"Ah . . . yes. I guess I am," he admitted. He forced himself to smile and walked past her and went to the hall and to his bedroom. Once there he took off his suit coat and went to the bathroom which served both his bedroom and hers. He washed his hands. Leaving the water running,

he went through the open door on her side and tiptoed over to the vanity. He looked down. The cigar wasn't there any more. He sucked in a small breath and went back, turned off the water and returned to the living room.

"Had supper?" the woman asked, in a voice that didn't give a damn whether he had or not.

Mr. Fransic lowered himself into the tablespoon chair. "I guess I just wasn't very hungry," he lied.

She grunted. She yawned. Mr. Fransic watched her for a moment and then said — and very, very softly: "You look a little tired, dear."

"Do I?"

"A little." He smiled, lifted his shoulders. "Been shopping?"

"Uhh-uhh."

"Oh," said Mr. Fransic. He watched as his wife's arm reached over for the cigarettes on the coffee table. He watched her poke at her full red lips, light the cigarette, then droop the arm back on the cushions.

She blew smoke at the ceiling. "It's a bored look, probably," she finally offered. "Not tired. Haven't been out of the apartment all day. Time's been dragging."

Mr. Fransic's eyes widened. "Oh," he said. "I'm sorry. Yes, time does go by slowly sometimes. When you're all alone."

"Doesn't it, though?" she agreed. She turned her head sideways and looked at him. Almost a grin.

"Nobody drop in?" he said after a moment.

"I just said, didn't I?"

"Ah," said Mr. Fransic.

A little quiet began to creep out from the remote corners of the room. Mr. Fransic dropped his eyes to his thin hands folded in his lap. His wife puffed smoke curlingly at the ceiling. Somewhere in the apartment a wall cracked uneasily, sounding very loud in the silence of the room.

At last the woman said, staring at him with half-closed eyes: "Mother called long-distance today. She's very ill again."

Mr. Fransic looked up. "Your mother?" he said. "Sorry to hear that, dear. What seems to be the trouble?"

"Same thing," said the woman. "Diabetes. It's a bad attack this time; she was unconscious for seven hours."

"That's a shame!" said Mr. Fransic sincerely. "A shame. She has to be very careful, at her age."

The woman nodded. "She wants me to come up for a few days. She needs me."

Mr. Fransic blinked.

"I told her I could fly up day after tomorrow. I'll stay there a few days and look after her."

"But . . ." said Mr. Fransic. "That will mean you'll be away on your birthday. Couldn't she

wait? I mean, couldn't . . ."

"Now there's a nice unselfish attitude, Willard," she said levelly.

Mr. Fransic made small flutterings with his hands. "I didn't mean that," he apologized. "I mean, the way it sounded. All I meant was that it is too bad. We have always celebrated your birthday together, you know."

"It can wait," she said. "It will have to."

"Very well, Beatrice."

She yawned again and snaked herself lazily to a sitting position. Her feet touched the floor and a part of her dress caught under her and bunched, exposing the cream of her long graceful thighs. A moment later she stood up. "Maybe I am a little tired at that," she said. "I think I'll go to bed."

Mr. Fransic nodded.

The woman started to sway on by the tablespoon chair. Mr. Fransic tilted his head, said in a mildly reproving tone: "Got a little kiss for me tonight?"

But she didn't stop. "At our ages?" she said over her shoulder. She almost said *your age*. A moment later sounds came from the bathroom, running-water sounds. A little later the bathroom door opened, closed again. A little snicking click of the bolt on her side. After that there were no sounds whatever. Mr. Fransic sat there for a long long while. His eyes were opened but seeing nothing, the eyes of a thin, underprivileged little Buddha winking glassily out at all the combined misery of the ages past; of the day that is now; and the writhing interminable years yet to come. It was quite late when he finally got up and went softly out to the kitchen.

He took the waste can first. He pawed through it right to the bottom. In it were the usual assorted leavings of packaged foods with their discarded wrappers. There was no cigar. He stood there looking down at the pawed-over can.

There was one other place, of course, the chemical reducer gadget on the left side of the sink. But if she had touched the little lever that controlled the chemicals, it would be gone already. However, it was worth a look. He dropped the lid on the waste can and went over to the sink.

The reducer device had a swinging, mono-metal door rather much like a miniature safe. He spun the screw-dial that sealed the door against leakage. Then he grabbed the handle and pulled outward. Nothing happened, the door was stuck. He braced his feet solidly and heaved once more — hard. The door flew open, leaped away from his unprepared fingers and went back with a loud crash against the sink cabinet.

Mr. Fransic held his breath. Then he pulled the door to again and spun the screw dial tight.

When his wife's pajama-clad form showed in the doorway he was bending over the open door of the food locker.

"What was that noise?" the woman demanded.

Mr. Fransic's head swivelled, looking as though he were startled. "Noise?" he said. "Oh. Yes. I'm sorry, dear, did it disturb you? I accidentally kicked over the waste can. Made a terrific racket."

"The waste can?" Her voice dripped with suspicion.

Mr. Fransic still smiled. "I — I'm very sory, Beatrice. Clumsy of me. I wasn't looking where I was going, I guess."

"You look guilty as all hell about something," she said flatly.

"Beatrice!" His eyes went shock-wide.

"Oh, all right. But be quiet, will you? I'm trying to sleep."

"I said I was sorry, dear," Mr. Fransic said humbly. "Just getting a snack to eat. I felt a bit hungry after all."

After a while, after she had gone back to her bedroom, he went back to the chemical reducer gadget. This time he was very careful, but when he looked into it he saw nothing. If she had thrown it in, there would be no way of telling now. Or ever.

The next night, on his way home from the office, Mr. Fransic bought his first box of cigars. They were the *Corona del Lobo* brand and they were extraordinarily cheap, which shocked him strangely.

This time he didn't go through the bronze portals, but instead went around the side of the apartment building. He followed the blank face of the brick wall until he came to a brown painted metal door. He tried it. It was open and he went in.

The hall was long, gray, filled with smells of disinfectant, paint and steam coming up from hot laundry. It was lighted by regularly spaced electric globes that glinted mistily like big wet heads of cabbage growing upside down. At the end of the hall was a door marked "Superintendent". Mr. Fransic knocked first, then went in.

Rick Mason looked up at him, looked up from behind a tiny desk that wasn't meant for a man his size. He waved with a careless movement of a tanned muscular hand. "Hi, Fransic," he said, omitting the "Mr."

He was a big man. Big broad shoulders. Big strong chest and tapering hips. In a business suit he looked good. In trunks he looked better. Compared to him, Mr. Fransic, with his box of cigars bulking largely under his thin arm, looked child-like and helpless.

"How are you, Mason?" Mr. Fransic asked politely.

Mason shrugged. "Still twitch-

ing." And then he almost snickered. "What's the matter, something wrong with your trick bar?"

"It's fine," said Mr. Fransic. "On my way home tonight I just happened to remember that the hot tap in the shower seems to turn off and on a little stiffly. I was just wondering if you'd looked at it lately?"

Mason shrugged again. "Didn't know about it."

"Oh." Mr. Fransic sighed quietly. "I see. Well, it isn't serious, of course. Sometime if you get the chance . . ."

"Yeah." Mason's eyes went to the package under Mr. Fransic's arm. "Taking up smoking now?" It wasn't quite a sneer the way he said it.

Mr. Fransic smiled very carefully, very tightly. "Oh, no. But I have a customer who evidently thinks so. He gave them to me. I was thinking that since I can't use them, it would be a shame to let them dry out. Perhaps you know of one of the tenants here in the building who smokes cigars, Mason? I mean . . ."

Mason laughed. "I'll look in a mirror and give 'em to the first man I see. That okay? Happens I smoke cigars myself." He reached over for the box, took it. He looked at it. His jaw went down. "*Corona del Lobo's*, huh? Be darned. By a strange coincidence, that's my own brand."

For an instant Mr. Fransic almost swayed. He leaned over, gripped the edge of the desk with his thin fingers.

"Something wrong?" said Mason. "You got a complexion looks like it came out of a buck bag."

Mr. Fransic shook his head. "No. J-just a little overtired, I guess. Working hard lately." He turned to go, and added: "Glad you can use them, Mason."

"Much obliged. About that shower . . . I'll sneak up there next week sometime. Happens I've got a large bundle of last-minute stuff to attend to as it is, and it's all got to get done before tomorrow night. Leaving on vacation then, see?"

He didn't notice the look in Mr. Fransic's eyes when he said that. Perhaps he wouldn't have recognized it if he had. There are people to whom a certain kind of sickness is something they never heard about. Or if they did they only laugh at it. Mr. Fransic closed the door quietly behind him.

Upstairs his wife picked up an airline ticket from the coffee table, made a little fillip with it in the air, and then dropped it. "Leaving at ten tomorrow night," she said tersely.

Mr. Fransic didn't answer that. He sat down.

"What's the matter?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he said. He looked up at her. There was hurt in his

eyes, but it showed for a brief instant only. After a moment he said: "One of these days I must call the building superintendent, Beatrice. The big front door downstairs seems to stick a little. Doesn't respond to the photo-electric cell the way it should. Had you noticed it?"

But she was turning away. She said no. She was hardly listening.

"I wonder what his telephone number is," he pursued gently.

"Four three seven," she said, bored. "Inside line."

Mr. Fransic's eyes tightened. "Oh. I see."

There are lies and there are lies, the world is full of them; Mr. Fransic would have been the last to deny it. He listened patiently to his wife's smooth explanation: "I remember from the time I looked it up a month or so ago. When the beer tap on your bar came unstuck."

"Yes, of course," he said.

The following day Mr. Fransic called Seattle long-distance from his office. Beatrice's mother told him she felt fine, hadn't had any dizzy spells or anything lately, and thanked him for calling. When he put down the phone, Mr. Fransic's teeth looked as bright and as sharp as a tong man's hatchet.

That afternoon he paid a visit to one of his plants. Wandering around among the tall skyscrapers of the big machines and furnaces, his thin form was unnoticed. Once again, later on, he left his office, and when he returned he had with him a package wrapped and tied with colored string. He waited until the four-thirty whistles blew, until the office employees had all gone. Then he took the package over to his desk and untied it and took off the paper wrapper. It was a big box of candy. He examined the cellophane sealing on the package very carefully. After that he opened the center drawer of his desk twice — once to take out a narrow pearl-handled knife. It was dark when he finally went home.

Her bags were packed and on the floor near the coffee table. After supper she went to her bedroom. When she came out, finally, at nine-fifteen, she was dressed, ready to go.

"I can drive you to the airport, Beatrice," he offered courteously.

"Don't bother, I'll catch a cab."

He nodded. "Here's something," he said, and went to the closet and got the big box of candy. "A little something for your mother. It isn't much, I didn't have much time today."

"What? What is it?"

"A little remembrance," he said softly. "Nothing much, just a box of candy."

Her dark eyes went very, very wide. "Candy? Candy, did you say?"

He nodded.

Her lips curled. "You *are* raw when you want to be, aren't you? Mother has diabetes, and you know she can't have candy."

Mr. Fransic's hand flew to his mouth. "Oh, say!" he exclaimed quickly. "Oh, I didn't think . . . I'm terribly sorry, Beatrice. I . . . here, give it to me."

"Uhh-uhh, Willard." She tucked it under her arm. "I think I just will offer it to her at that. I'll tell her you send it with love." She grinned pityingly.

Weaver was a human guy, you can be a Detective Lieutenant working out of Homicide and still be human if you try. Weaver said softly: "There's something phony about this, Mr. Fransic, and we're not going to just stuff it away in a file cabinet somewhere. I want you to know that." He stared sympathetically at Mr. Fransic. Mr. Fransic looked ill, he thought. He said — and still more softly: "You want to see the bare rocks on the bottom?"

Mr. Fransic nodded slowly.

Weaver took a breath. "All right then. It was in a small apartment down at Malibu. One of the tenants heard your wife scream. It was too late. Both of them died, your wife and this man Richard Mason. You know Mason?"

"I — I think I have heard that name," Mr. Fransic said hesitatingly. "I'm not quite certain."

Weaver nodded. "Probably you did. He was the super in the building where you live. They both ate some candy, it seems." Weaver's eyebrows raised a little. "Poisoned candy," he added.

"P-poisoned?"

"That's the phony part. That's the part that makes me say we're investigating this right down to the last alley. Our Lab reports that, as far as they can determine, the box had been opened for the first time in that apartment. And yet it was poisoned. The whole top layer was poisoned. Each piece had had the bottom scooped out and this poison put in and the bottom replaced again. It was a compound of cyanogen."

Mr. Fransic looked dumbfounded.

"Cyanogen," said Weaver grimly, "is commercial potassium cyanide. They use it for treating steel. Whoever did it wasn't very kind. But then murderers never are."

Mr. Fransic didn't say a word. Staring at him, Weaver felt a little wave of pity for him. He might have all the money there was, but you had to feel sorry for him just the same. He looked like a lonesome, abandoned dog, somehow; and the trouble with lonesome, abandoned dogs is that they're part human and part animal but not quite enough of either one. And so you pity them. If you have the decency that God planted in your heart, you have to.

"Didn't you even have a suspicion what was going on?" he asked very gently.

But Mr. Fransic didn't need pity now. His eyes took on a grave dignity as real as the pain in a broken arm. "I was happily married for more than ten years," he said simply. "Last night at nine-thirty I kissed my wife goodbye. She was on her way to Seattle to visit her mother."

Weaver nodded and looked away from Mr. Fransic's eyes. *That* checked solid, if nothing else did. The woman had an airline ticket in her bag. And she was dead because she hadn't used it.

Mr. Fransic went home. The massive ornamental bronze doors swung open for him noiselessly. He went into the lobby.

"*Good morning, Mr. Fransic!*" rasped out the ID Box. "*You're certainly looking fit today, sir!*"

Mr. Fransic went to the elevator. He went upstairs. He murmured into the chromium grill at the door and went inside.

He walked deliberately over to the figurine of the nude on the coffee table. He looked at it distastefully. He picked it up, raised it high above his head and flung it down. It shattered in many pieces that winked up at him brightly like the facets on a big diamond.

He looked around at the tablespoon chair, at the long long divan. A corner of his mouth twisted up. He took a deep breath and strode across the living room, down to the hall. He stopped at her bedroom door. He jerked it open, went in, went to the sprawling satin headboard with the naked women on it. Snarling, he clawed at it and ripped it to shreds. He turned around and stared at the crystal-topped vanity. He made his way over to it. He reached down with a hooked right arm and swept the bottles and jars and powder boxes to the floor with a savage motion, and then stood and glared at the wreckage.

The scent of an outrageously high-priced perfume reached out into the room and embraced him. It swirled around him like a snake coiling, full of sinuous grace, and deadly. Mr. Fransic snorted it out of his nostrils. He went back to the living room. He went to the drapes at the windows and tore them aside to let the sunshine in. He threw up the windows and breathed of the clean air of the day. He stood there for a long while. Inhaling. Exhaling. Inhaling. Exhaling.

But there are some things that won't be buried no matter how deep a hole you dig. Mr. Fransic knew it. He felt sick because he knew it. He tried to fight against it. He summoned all the little store of strength he possessed to fight it.

And it wasn't enough. It never would be.

Trembling, he turned at last from the windows and went to his den. He went in. Staring at the softly-gleaming thing over in the corner, he went to it, stood before it as though he were standing before her bier with the candles burning and the incense rising. He reached out a shaking right hand for the gin bottle. He lifted it. There was surrender in every fibre of him.

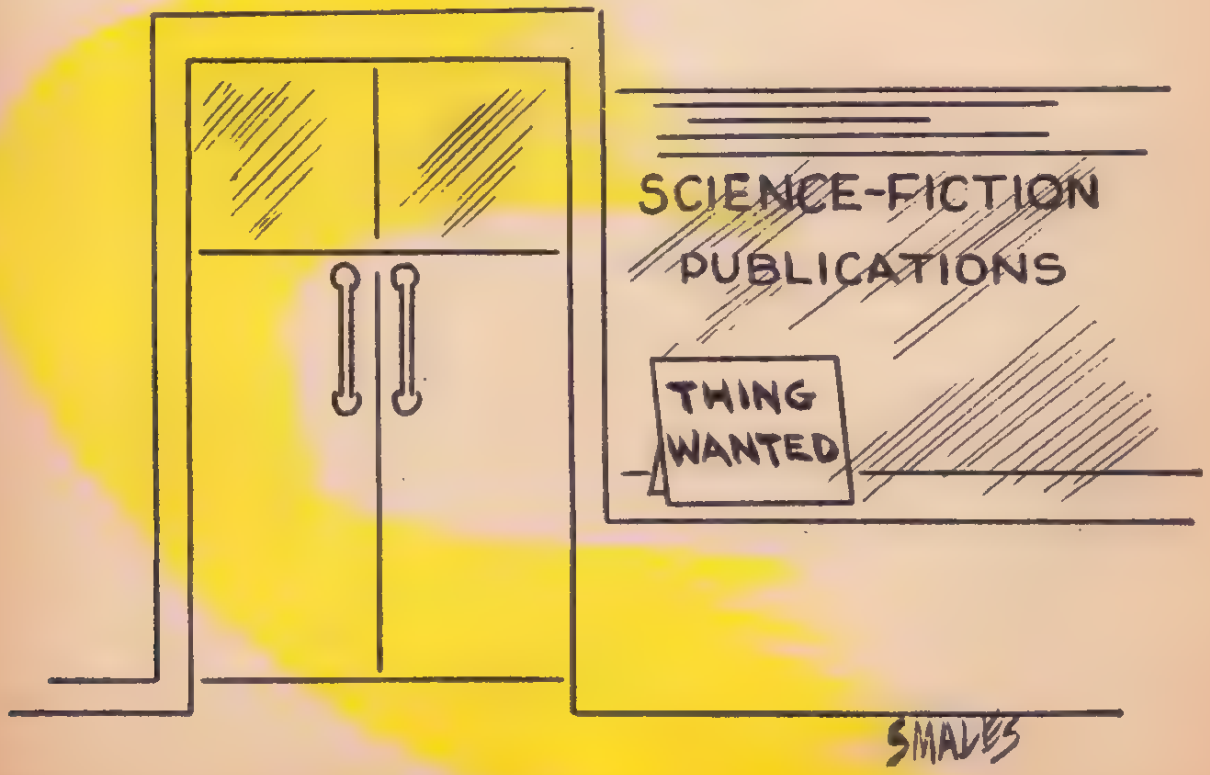
The cool drawling feminine voice said to him: "*I have changed the tape, Willard. This is to tell you I'm leaving. For good. The business about mother being ill, and the plane ticket, wasn't on the level of course, but that's the way it is. Good-bye. Probably you had better drink some of that gin you're holding.*"

Mr. Fransic's face showed no expression.

"*I have changed the tape, Willard. This is to tell you . . .*"

He didn't hear. He dropped the bottle. He went out of the den. He went out of the apartment. He went downstairs in the elevator. He stood in the lobby and stared mutely at the ID Box over on the wall. He walked slowly toward it. He was approaching it from the wrong direction. He got to within ten feet of it.

And then something happened. Something inside its mechanism made three sharp, clicking sounds and an alarm bell began to sound far off and dimly. And a scratching sound came from the speaker built into it and a very stern, very official-sounding voice said to Mr.



Fransic: "*This is Municipal Security speaking. You are approaching an Identity Box. This is a violation of Code Sixteen-Oh-Four-Five. Stop where you are. Stop.*"

Mr. Fransic looked as though he didn't hear. His steps kept on going. His lips were parted and there was absolutely nothing whatever in his mild blue eyes.

"*Stop!*" The voice was a hoarse command now. Something inside the machine made a whirring noise, and a small circular port in the middle of its casing slid back, revealing a tiny black hole from inside of which something glinted at Mr. Fransic. "*Stop! In accordance with Municipal Protection Code, this is a last warning. Stop where you are and remain motionless!*"

Mr. Fransic kept coming.

The shot hit him in the throat a little below his Adam's apple. A wisp of smoke curled up from the black hole and a little cordite odor filtered out thinly into the lobby. Mr. Fransic was aware of neither. He swayed backward. His feet acted as if they were drunk. They stumbled a little, carried him back and to the left and out to the carpeted space between tall, fluted columns where people were supposed to walk in the lobby. His eyes were shut now and his hands were limp at his sides, but he was still on his feet.

He stayed that way for an incredible length of time. Over on the wall the alarm bell stopped ringing. Something made three sharp, clicking sounds inside the mechanism.

Mr. Fransic went down as slowly and as lightly as pollen drifting in a gentle breeze. He went down to his knees. He balanced precariously there for an instant and then pitched over backwards. His hat fell off, rolled a few inches. Mr. Fransic didn't move again.

The ID Box rasped suddenly: "*Good morning, Mr. Fransic! You're certainly looking fit this morning, sir!*"

▲

The Egyptians had a look for it!

THE ancient Egyptians used a vertical line to represent the figure 1, a horseshoe for the figure 10. 100 was depicted by a corkscrew; 10,000 by a pointing finger; 100,000 by a jumping frog. And 1,000,000 by a man with an astonishing look on his face!

▲

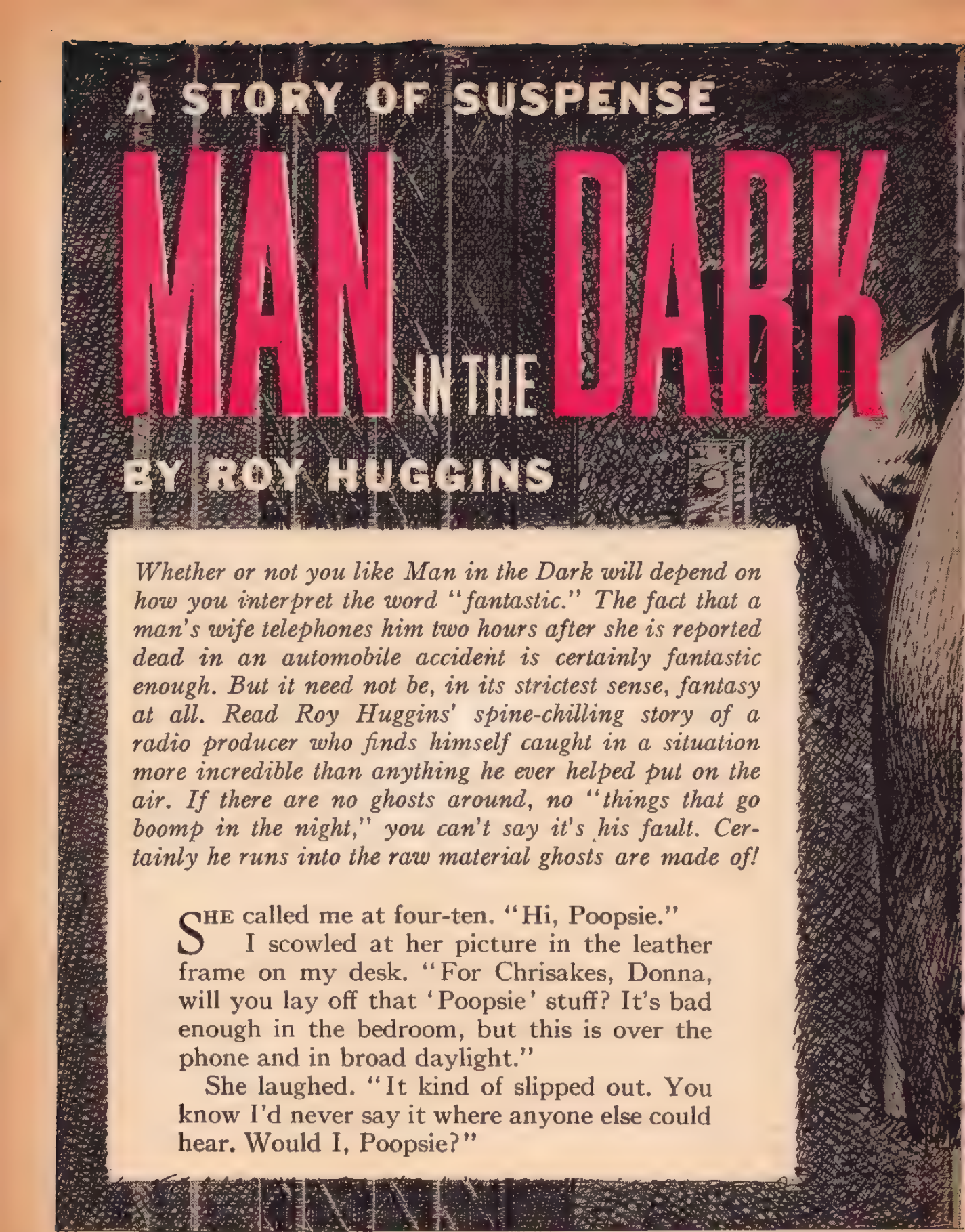
THE other planets may not be able to support life, but it isn't easy on this one either.

— Banking

A STORY OF SUSPENSE

MAN IN THE DARK

BY ROY HUGGINS

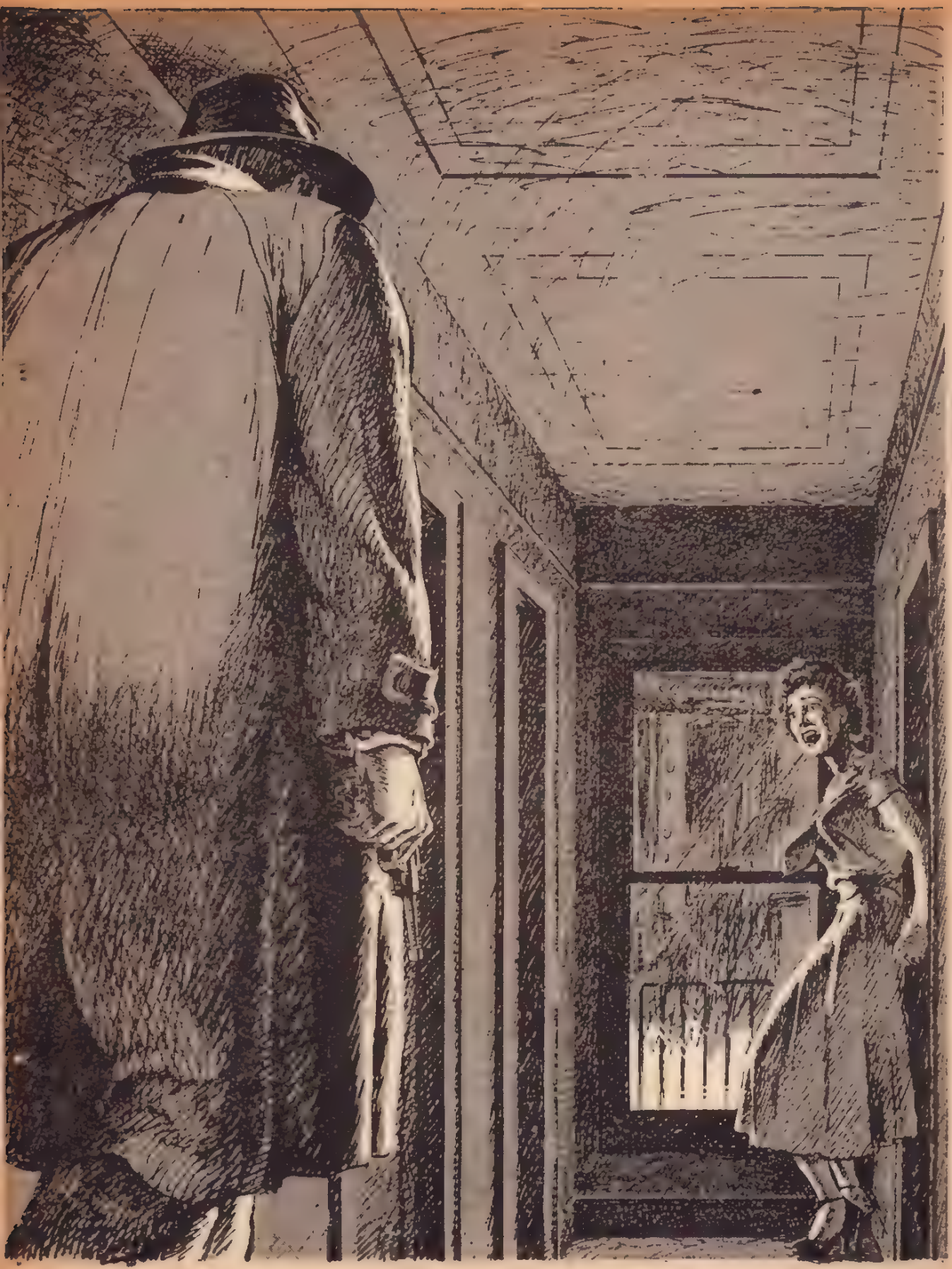


Whether or not you like Man in the Dark will depend on how you interpret the word "fantastic." The fact that a man's wife telephones him two hours after she is reported dead in an automobile accident is certainly fantastic enough. But it need not be, in its strictest sense, fantasy at all. Read Roy Huggins' spine-chilling story of a radio producer who finds himself caught in a situation more incredible than anything he ever helped put on the air. If there are no ghosts around, no "things that go boomp in the night," you can't say it's his fault. Certainly he runs into the raw material ghosts are made of!

SHE called me at four-ten. "Hi, Poopsie."

I scowled at her picture in the leather frame on my desk. "For Chrisakes, Donna, will you lay off that 'Poopsie' stuff? It's bad enough in the bedroom, but this is over the phone and in broad daylight."

She laughed. "It kind of slipped out. You know I'd never say it where anyone else could hear. Would I, Poopsie?"



"What's all that noise?"

"The man's here fixing the vacuum. Hey, we eating home tonight, or out? Or are you in another deadline dilemma?"

"No dilemma. Might as well —"

"Can't hear you, Clay."

I could hardly hear *her*. I raised my voice. "Tell the guy to turn that goddam thing off. I started to say we might as well eat out and then take in that picture at the Paramount. Okay?"

"All right. What time'll you get home?"

"Hour — hour'n a half."

The vacuum cleaner buzz died out just as she said, " 'Bye now," and the two words sounded loud and unnatural. I put back the receiver and took off my hat and sat down behind the desk. We were doing a radio adaptation of "Echo of a Scream" that coming Saturday and I was just back from a very unsatisfactory rehearsal. When things don't go right, it's the producer who gets it in the neck, and mine was still sensitive from the previous week. I kept a small office in a building at Las Palmas and Yucca, instead of using the room allotted me at NBS. Some producers do that, since you can accomplish a lot more without a secretary breathing down your neck and the actors dropping in for gin rummy or a recital of their love life.

The telephone rang. A man's voice, deep and solemn, said, "Is this Hillside 7–8691?"

"That's right," I said.

"Like to speak to Mr. Clay Kane."

"I'm Clay Kane. Who's this?"

"The name's Lindstrom, Mr. Kane. Sergeant Lindstrom, out of the sheriff's office, Hollywood sub-station."

"What's on your mind, Sergeant?"

"We got a car here, Mr. Kane," the deep slow voice went on. "Dark blue '51 Chevrolet, two-door, license 2W78–40. Registered to Mrs. Donna Kane, 7722 Fountain Avenue, Los Angeles."

I could feel my forehead wrinkling into a scowl. "That's my wife's car. What do you mean: you 'got' it?"

"Well, now, I'm afraid I got some bad news for you, Mr. Kane." The voice went from solemn to grave. "Seems your wife's car went off the road up near the Stone Canyon Reservoir. I don't know if you know it or not, but there's some pretty bad hills up —"

"I know the section," I said. "Who was in the car?"

". . . Just your wife, Mr. Kane."

My reaction was a mixture of annoyance and mild anger. "Not *my* wife, Sergeant. I spoke to her on the phone not five minutes ago.

She's at home. Either somebody stole the car or, more likely, she loaned it to one of her friends. How bad is it?"

There was a pause at the other end. When the voice spoke again, the solemnity was still there, but now a vague thread of suspicion was running through it.

"The car burned, Mr. Kane. The driver was still in it."

"That's terrible," I said. "When did it happen?"

"We don't know exactly. That's pretty deserted country. Another car went by after it happened, spotted the wreck and called us. We figure it happened around two-thirty."

"Not my wife," I said again. "You want to call her, she can tell you who borrowed the car. Unless, like I say, somebody swiped it. You mean you found no identification at all?"

". . . Hold on a minute, Mr. Kane."

There followed the indistinct mumble you get when a hand is held over the receiver at the other end of the wire. I waited, doodling on a scratch pad, wondering vaguely if my car insurance would cover this kind of situation. Donna had never loaned the car before, at least not to my knowledge.

The sergeant came back. "Hate to trouble you, Mr. Kane, but I expect you better get out here. You got transportation, or would you want one of our men to pick you up?"

This would just about kill our plans for the evening. I tried reasoning with him. "Look here, Officer, I don't want to sound cold-blooded about this, but what can I do out there? If the car was stolen, there's nothing I can tell you. If Mrs. Kane let somebody use it, she can tell you who it was over the phone. Far as the car's concerned, my insurance company'll take care of that."

The deep slow voice turned a little hard. "Afraid it's not that simple. We're going to have to insist on this, Mr. Kane. Take Stone Canyon until you come to Fontenelle Way, half a mile or so south of Mulholland Drive. The accident happened about halfway between those two points. I'll have one of the boys keep an eye out for you. Shouldn't take you more'n an hour at the most."

I gave it another try. "You must've found *some* identification, Sergeant. Something that —"

He cut in sharply. "Yeah, we found something. Your wife's handbag. Maybe she loaned it along with the car."

A dry click meant I was alone on the wire. I hung up slowly and sat there staring at the wall calendar. That handbag bothered me. If Donna had loaned the Chevvy to someone, she wouldn't have gone off and left the bag.

And if she'd left it on the seat while visiting or shopping, she would have discovered the theft of the car and told me long before this.

There was one sure way of bypassing all this guesswork. I picked up the receiver again and dialed the apartment.

After the twelfth ring I broke the connection. Southern California in August is as warm as anybody would want, but I was beginning to get chilly along the backbone. She could be at the corner grocery or at the Feldmans' across the hall, but I would have liked it a lot better if she had been in the apartment and answered my call.

It seemed I had a trip ahead of me. Stone Canyon Road came in between Beverly Glen Boulevard and Sepulveda, north of Sunset. That was out past Beverly Hills and the whole district was made up of hills and canyons, with widely scattered homes clinging to the slopes. A car could go off almost any one of the twisting roads through there and not be noticed for a lot longer than two hours. It was the right place for privacy, if privacy was what you were looking for.

The thing to do, I decided, was to stop at the apartment first. It was on the way, so I wouldn't lose much time, and I could take Donna along with me. Getting an explanation direct from her ought to satisfy the cops, and we could still get in a couple of drinks and a fast dinner, and make that premiere.

I covered the typewriter, put on my hat, locked up and went down to the parking lot. It was a little past four-twenty.

II

It was a five-minute trip to the apartment building where Donna and I had been living since our marriage seven months before. I waited while a fat woman in red slacks and a purple and burnt-orange blouse pulled a yellow Buick away from the curb, banging a fender or two in the process, then parked and got out onto the walk.

It had started to cool off a little, the way it does in this part of the country along toward late afternoon. A slow breeze rustled the dusty fronds of palm trees lining the parkways along Fountain Avenue. A thin pattern of traffic moved past and the few pedestrians in sight had the look of belonging there.

I crossed to the building entrance and went in. The small foyer was deserted and the mailbox for 2C, our apartment, was empty. I unlocked the inner door and climbed the carpeted stairs to the second floor and walked slowly down the dimly lighted corridor.

Strains of a radio newscast

filtered through the closed door of the apartment across from 2C. Ruth Feldman was home. She might have word, if I needed it. I hoped I wouldn't need it. There was the faint scent of jasmine on the air.

I unlocked the door to my apartment and went in and said, loudly: "Hey, Donna. It's your ever-lovin'."

All that came back was silence. Quite a lot of it. I closed the door and leaned against it and heard my heart thumping away. The white metal Venetian blinds at the living room windows overlooking the street were lowered but not turned and there was a pattern of sunlight on the maroon carpeting. Our tank-type vacuum cleaner was on the floor in front of the fireplace, its hose tracing a lazy S along the rug like a gray python, the cord plugged into a wall socket.

The silence was beginning to rub against my nerves. I went into the bedroom. The blind was closed and I switched on one of the red-shaded lamps on Donna's dressing table. Nobody there. The double bed was made up, with her blue silk robe across the foot and her slippers with the powder blue pompons under the trailing edge of the pale yellow spread.

My face in the vanity's triple mirrors had that strained look. I turned off the light and walked out of there and on into the bathroom, then the kitchen and breakfast nook. I knew all the time Donna wouldn't be in any of them; I had known it from the moment that first wave of silence answered me.

But I looked anyway. . . .

She might have left a note for me, I thought. I returned to the bedroom and looked on the nightstand next to the telephone. No note. Just the day's mail: two bills, unopened; a business envelope from my agent, unopened, and a letter from Donna's mother out in Omaha, opened and thrust carelessly back into the envelope.

The mail's being there added up to one thing at least: Donna had been in the apartment after three o'clock that afternoon. What with all this economy wave at the Post Offices around the country, we were getting one delivery a day and that not before the middle of the afternoon. The phone call, the vacuum sweeper, the mail on the nightstand: they were enough to prove that my wife was around somewhere. Out for a lipstick, more than likely, or a carton of Fatimas, or to get a bet down on a horse.

I left the apartment and crossed the hall and rang the bell to 2D. The news clicked off in the middle of the day's baseball scores and after a moment the door opened and Ruth Feldman was standing there.

"Oh. Clay." She was a black-haired little thing, with not enough color from being indoors too much, and a pair of brown eyes that, in a prettier face, would have made her something to moon over on long winter evenings. "I *thought* it was too early for Ralph; he won't be home for two hours yet."

"I'm looking for Donna," I said. "You seen her?"

She leaned negligently against the door edge and moved her lashes at me. The blouse she was wearing was cut much too low. "No-o-o. Not since this morning anyway. She came in about eleven for coffee and a cigarette. Stayed maybe half an hour, I guess it was."

"Did she say anything about her plans for the day? You know: whether she was going to see anybody special, something like that?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Hunh-uh. She did say something about her agent wanting her to have lunch with this producer — what's his name? — who does the Snow Soap television show. They're casting for a new musical and she thinks that's why this lunch. But I suppose you know about that. You like to come in for a drink?"

I told her no and thanked her and she pouted her lips at me. I could come in early any afternoon and drink her liquor and give her a roll in the hay, no questions asked, no obligations and no recriminations. Not just because it was me, either. It was there for anyone who was friendly, no stranger and had clean fingernails. You find at least one like her in any apartment house, where the husband falls asleep on the couch every night over a newspaper or the television set.

I asked her to keep an eye out for Donna and tell her I had to run out to Stone Canyon on some urgent and unexpected business and that I'd call in the first chance I got. She gave me a big smile and an up-from-under stare and closed the door very gently.

I lighted a cigarette and went back to the apartment to leave a note for Donna next to the telephone. Then I took a last look around and walked down one flight to the street, got into the car and headed for Stone Canyon.

III

It was a quarter past five by the time I got out there. There

was an especially nasty curve in the road just to the north of Yestone, and off on the left shoulder where the bend was sharpest three department cars were drawn up in a bunch. A uniformed man was taking a smoke behind the wheel of the lead car; he looked up sharply as I made a U turn and stopped behind the last car.

By the time I had cut off the motor and opened the door, he was standing there scowling at me. "Where d'ya think you're goin', Mac?"

"Sergeant Lindstrom telephoned me," I said, getting out onto the sparse sun-baked growth they call grass in California.

He ran the ball of a thumb lightly along one cheek and eyed me stonily from under the stiff brim of his campaign hat. "Your name Kane?"

"That's it."

He took the thumb off his face and used it to point. "Down there. They're waitin' for you. Better take a deep breath, Mac. You won't like what they show you."

I didn't say anything. I went past him and on around the department car. The ground fell away in what almost amounted to a forty-five-degree slope, and a hundred yards down the slope was level ground. Down there a knot of men were standing near the scorched ruins of what had been an automobile. It could have been Donna's Chevvy or it could have been any other light job. From its condition and across the distance I couldn't tell.

It took some time and a good deal of care for me to work my way to the valley floor without breaking my neck. There were patches of scarred earth spaced out in a reasonably straight line all the way down the incline where the car had hit and bounced and hit again, over and over. Shards of broken glass lay scattered about, and about half way along was a twisted bumper and a section of grillwork. There was a good deal of brush around and it came in handy for hanging on while I found footholds. It was a tough place to get down, but the car at the bottom hadn't had any trouble making it.

A tall, slender, quiet-faced man in gray slacks and a matching sport shirt buttoned at the neck but without a tie was waiting for me. He nodded briefly and looked at me out of light blue eyes under thick dark brows.

"Are you Clay Kane?" It was a soft, pleasant voice, not a cop's voice at all.

I nodded, looking past him at the pile of twisted metal. The four men near it were looking my way, their faces empty of expression.

The quiet-faced man said, "I'm Chief Deputy Martell, out of Hollywood. They tell me it's your

wife's car, but that your wife wasn't using it. Has she told you yet who was?"

"Not yet; no. She was out when I called the apartment, although I'd spoken to her only a few minutes before."

"Any idea where she might be?"

I shrugged. "Several, but I didn't have a chance to do any checking. The sergeant said you were in a hurry."

"I see. . . . I think I'll ask you to take a quick glance at the body we took out of the car. It probably won't do much good, but you never know. I'd better warn you: it won't be pleasant."

"That's all right," I said. "I spent some time in the Pacific during the war. We opened up pill boxes with flame throwers."

"That should help." He turned and moved off, skirting the wreckage, and I followed. A small khaki tarpaulin was spread out on the ground, bulged in the center where it covered an oblong object. Not a very big object. I began to catch the acrid-sweetish odor of burned meat, mixed with the faint biting scent of gasoline.

Martell bent and took hold of a corner of the tarpaulin. He said flatly, "Do the best you can, Mr. Kane," and flipped back the heavy canvas.

It looked like nothing human. Except for the contours of legs and arms, it could have been a side of beef hauled out of a burning barn. Where the face had been was a smear of splintered and charred bone that bore no resemblance to a face. No hair, no clothing except for the remains of a woman's shoe still clinging to the left foot; only blackened, flame-gnawed flesh and bones. And over it all the stench of a charnel house.

I backed away abruptly and clamped down on my teeth, fighting back a wave of nausea. Martell allowed the canvas to fall back into place. "Sorry, Mr. Kane. We can't overlook any chances."

"It's all right," I mumbled.

"You couldn't identify . . . her?"

I shuddered. "Christ, no! Nobody could!"

"Let's have a look at the car."

I circled the wreck twice. It had stopped right side up, the tires flat, the hood ripped to shreds, the engine shoved halfway into the front seat. The steering wheel was snapped off and the dashboard appeared to have been worked over with a sledge hammer. Flames had eaten away the upholstery and blackened the entire interior.

It was Donna's car; no doubt about that. The license plates showed the right number and a couple of rust spots on the right rear fender were as I remembered them. I said as much to Chief

Deputy Martell and he nodded briefly and went over to say something I couldn't hear to the four men.

He came back to me after a minute or two. "I've a few questions. Nothing more for you down here. Let's go back upstairs."

He was holding something in one hand. It was a woman's bag: blue suede, small, with a gold clasp shaped like a question mark. I recognized it and my mouth felt a little dry.

It was a job getting up the steep slope. The red loam was dry and crumbled under my feet. The sun was still high enough to be hot on my back and my hands were sticky with ooze from the sagebrush.

Martell was waiting for me when I reached the road. I sat down on the front bumper of one of the department cars and shook the loose dirt out of my shoes, wiped most of the sage ooze off my palms and brushed the knees of my trousers. The man in the green khaki uniform was still behind the wheel of the lead car but he wasn't smoking now.

I followed the sheriff into the front seat of a black and white Mercury with a buggy whip aerial at the rear bumper and a radio phone on the dash. He lit up a small yellow cigar in violation of a fire hazard signboard across the road from us. He dropped the match into the dashboard ashtray and leaned back in the seat and bounced the suede bag lightly on one of his broad palms.

IV

He said, "One of the boys found this in a clump of sage halfway down the slope. You ever see it before?"

"My wife has one like it."

He cocked an eye at me. "Not like it, Mr. Kane. This is hers. Personal effects, identification cards, all that. No doubt at all."

". . . Okay."

"And that's your wife's car?"

"Yeah."

"But you say it's not your wife who was in it?"

"No question about it," I said firmly.

"When did you see her last?"

"Around nine-thirty this morning."

"But you talked to her later, I understand."

"That's right."

"What time?"

"A few minutes past four this afternoon."

He puffed out some blue smoke. "Sure it was your wife?"

"If I wouldn't know, who would?"

His strong face was thoughtful, his blue eyes distant. "Mrs. Kane's a singer, I understand."

"That's right," I told him. "Uses her malden name: Donna Collins."

He smiled suddenly, showing good teeth. "Oh, sure. The missus and I heard her on the "Dancing in Velvet" program last week. She's good — and a mighty lovely young woman, Mr. Kane."

I muttered something polite. He put some cigar ash into the tray and leaned back again and said, "They must pay her pretty good, being a radio star."

"Not a star," I explained patiently. "Just a singer. It pays well, of course — but nothing like the top names pull down. However, Donna's well fixed in her own right; her father died a while back and left her what amounts to quite a bit of money. . . . Look, Sheriff, what's the point of keeping me here? I don't know who the dead woman is, but since she was using my wife's car, the one to talk to is Mrs. Kane. She's bound to be home by this time; why not ride into town with me and ask her?"

He was still holding the handbag. He put it down on the seat between us and looked off toward the blue haze that marked the foothills south of Burbank. "Your wife's not home, Mr. Kane," he said very quietly.

A vague feeling of alarm stirred within me. "How do you know that?" I demanded.

He gestured at the two-way radio. "The office is calling your apartment at ten-minute intervals. As soon as Mrs. Kane answers her phone, I'm to get word. I haven't got it yet."

I said harshly, "What am I supposed to do — sit here until they call you?"

He sighed a little and turned sideways on the seat far enough to cross his legs. The light blue of his eyes was frosted over now, and his jaw was a grim line.

"I'm going to have to talk to you like a Dutch uncle, Mr. Kane. As you saw, we've got a dead woman down there as the result of what, to all intents and purposes, was an unfortunate accident. Everything points to the victim's being your wife except for two things, one of them your insistence that you spoke to her on the phone nearly two hours *after* the accident. That leaves us wondering — and with any one of several answers. One is that you're lying; that you didn't speak to her at all. If that's the right answer, we can't figure out the reason behind it. Two: your wife loaned a friend the car. Three: somebody lifted it from where it was parked. Four: you drove up here with her, knocked her in the head and let the car roll over the edge."

"Of all the goddam —!"

He held up a hand, cutting me off. "Let's take 'em one at a time. I can't see any reason, even if you murdered her, why you'd say your wife telephoned you afterwards. So until and unless some-

thing turns up to show us why you'd lie about it, I'll have to believe she did make that call. As for her loaning the car, that could very well have happened, only it doesn't explain why she's missing now. This business of the car's being stolen doesn't hold up, because the key was still in the ignition and in this case."

He took a folded handkerchief from the side pocket of his coat and opened it. A badly scorched leather case came to light, containing the ignition and trunk keys. The rest of the hooks were empty. I sat there staring at it, feeling my insides slowly and painfully contracting.

"Recognize it?" Martell asked softly.

I nodded numbly. "It's Donna's."

He picked up the handbag with his free hand and thrust it at me. "Take a look through it."

Still numb, I released the clasp and pawed through the contents. A small green-leather wallet containing seventy or eighty dollars and the usual identification cards, one of them with my office address and phone number. Lipstick, compact, mirror, comb, two initialed handkerchiefs, a few hairpins. The French enamel cigarette case and matching lighter I'd given her on her twenty-fifth birthday three months ago. Less than a dollar in change.

That was all. Nothing else. I shoved the stuff back in the bag and closed the clasp with stiff fingers and sat there looking dully at Martell.

He was refolding the handkerchief around the key case. He returned it to his pocket carefully, took the cigar out of his mouth and inspected the glowing tip.

"Your wife wear any jewelry, Mr. Kane?" he asked casually.

I nodded. "A wristwatch. Her wedding and engagement rings."

"We didn't find them. No jewelry at all."

"You wouldn't, I said. "Whoever that is down there, she's not Donna Kane."

He sat there and looked out through the windshield and appeared to be thinking. He wore no hat and there was a stong sprinkling of gray in his hair and a bald spot about the size of a silver dollar at the crown. There was a network of fine wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, as there so often is in men who spend a great deal of time in the sun. He looked calm and confident and competent and not at all heroic.

Presently he said, "That phone call. No doubt at all that it was your wife?"

"None."

"Recognized her voice, eh?"

I frowned. "Not so much that. It was more what she said. You know, certain expressions nobody else'd use. Pet name — you know."

His lips quirked and I felt my cheeks burn. He said, "Near as you can remember, tell me about that call. If she sounded nervous or upset — the works."

I put it all together for him, forgetting nothing. Then I went on about stopping off at the apartment, what I'd found there and what Ruth Feldman had said. Martell didn't interrupt, only sat there drawing on his cigar and soaking it all in.

After I was finished, he didn't move or say anything for what seemed a long time. Then he leaned forward and ground out the stub of the cigar and put a hand in the coat pocket next to me and brought out one of those flapped bags women use for formal dress, about the size of a business envelope and with an appliquéd design worked into it. Wordlessly he turned back the flap and let a square gold compact and matching lipstick holder slide out into the other hand.

"Ever see these before, Kane?"

I took them from him. His expression was impossible to read. There was nothing unusual about the lipstick tube, but the compact had a circle of brilliants in one corner and the initials H. W. in the circle.

I handed them back. "New to me, Sheriff."

He was watching me closely. "Think a minute. This can be important. Either you or your wife know a woman with the initials H. W.?"

". . . Not that I . . . Helen? Helen! Sure; Helen Wainhope! Dave Wainhope's wife." I frowned. "I don't get it, Sheriff."

He said slowly, "We found this bag a few feet from the wreck. Any idea how it might have gotten there?"

"Not that I can think of."

"How well do you know these Wainhopes?"

"About as well as you get to know anybody. Dave is business manager for some pretty prominent radio people. A producer, couple of directors, seven or eight actors that I know of."

"You mean he's an agent?"

"Not that. These are people who make big money but can't seem to hang onto it. Dave collects their checks, puts 'em on an allowance, pays their bills and invests the rest. Any number of men in that line around town."

"How long have you known them?"

"Dave and Helen? Two-three years. Shortly after I got out here. As a matter of fact, he introduced me to Donna. She's one of his clients."

"The four of you go out together?"

"Now and then; sure."

"In your wife's car?"

". . . I see what you're getting at. You figure Helen might have

left her bag there. Not a chance, Sheriff. We always used Dave's Cadillac. Helen has a Pontiac convertible."

"When did you see them last?"

"Well, I don't know about Donna, but I had lunch with Dave . . . let's see . . . day before yesterday. He has an office in the Taft Building."

"Where do they live?"

"Over on one of those little roads off Beverly Glen. Not far from here, come to think about it."

With slow care he pushed the compact and lipstick back in the folder and dropped it into the pocket it had come out of. "Taft Building, hunh?" he murmured. "Think he's there now?"

I looked at my strapwatch. Four minutes till six. "I doubt it, Sheriff. He should be home by this time."

"You know the exact address?"

"Well, it's on Angola, overlooking the southern tip of the Reservoir. A good-sized redwood ranch house on the hill there. It's the only house within a couple miles. You can't miss it."

He leaned past me and swung open the door. "Go on home, Kane. Soon as your wife shows up, call the station and leave word for me. I may call you later."

"What about her car?"

He smiled without humor. "Nobody's going to swipe it. Notify your insurance agent in the morning. But I still want to talk to Mrs. Kane."

I slid out and walked back to my car. As I started the motor, the black and white Mercury made a tight turn on screaming tires and headed north. I pulled back onto the road and tipped a hand at the deputy. He glared at me over the cigarette he was lighting.

I drove much too fast all the way back to Hollywood.

V

She wasn't there.

I snapped the switch that lighted the end-table lamps flanking the couch and walked over to the window and stood there for a few minutes, staring down into Fountain Avenue. At seven o'clock it was still light outside. A small girl on roller skates scooted by, her sun-bleached hair flying. A tall thin number in a pale-blue sport coat and dark glasses got leisurely out of a green convertible with a wolf tail tied to the radiator emblem and sauntered into the apartment building across the street.

A formless fear was beginning to rise within me. I knew now that it had been born at four-thirty when I stopped off on my way to Stone Canyon and found the apartment empty. Seeing the charred body an hour later had strengthened that fear, even

though I knew the dead woman couldn't be Donna. Now that I had come home and found the place deserted, the fear was crawling into my throat, closing it to the point where breathing seemed a conscious effort.

Where was Donna?

I lighted a cigarette and began to pace the floor. Let's use a little logic on this, Kane. You used to be a top detective-story writer; let's see you go to work on this the way one of your private eyes would operate.

All right, we've got a missing woman to find. To complicate matters, the missing woman's car was found earlier in the day with a dead woman at the wheel. Impossible to identify her, but we know it's not the one we're after because *that* one called her husband *after* the accident.

Now, since your wife's obviously alive, Mr. Kane, she's missing for one of two reasons: either she can't come home or she doesn't want to. "Can't" would mean she's being held against her will; we've nothing to indicate *that*. That leaves the possibility of her not wanting to come home. What reason would a woman have for staying away from her husband? The more likely one would be that she was either sore at him for something or had left him for another man.

I said a short ugly word and threw my cigarette savagely into the fireplace. Donna would never pull a stunt like that! Hell, we'd only been married a few months and still as much in love as the day the knot was tied.

Yeah? How do you know? A lot of guys kid themselves into thinking the same thing, then wake up one morning and find the milkman has taken over. Or they find some hot love letters tied in blue ribbon and shoved under the mattress.

I stopped short. It was an idea. Not love letters, of course; but there might be something among her personal files that could furnish a lead. It was about as faint a possibility as they come, but at least it would give me something to do.

The big bottom drawer of her desk in the bedroom was locked. I remembered that she carried the key in the same case with those to the apartment and the car, so I used the fireplace poker to force the lock. Donna would raise hell about that when she got home, but I wasn't going to worry about that now.

There was a big Manila folder inside, crammed with letters, tax returns, receipted bills, bank books and miscellaneous papers. I dumped them out and began to paw through the collection. A lot of the stuff had come from Dave Wainhope's office, and there were at least a dozen letters signed by him explaining why he was sending her such-and-such.

The phone rang suddenly. I damned near knocked the chair over getting to it. It was Chief Deputy Martell.

"Mrs. Kane show up?"

"Not yet. No."

He must have caught the disappointment in my voice. It was there to catch. He said, "That's funny. . . . Anyway, the body we found in that car wasn't her."

"I told you that. Who was it?"

"This Helen Wainhope. We brought the remains into the Georgia Street Hospital and her husband made the I.D. about fifteen minutes ago."

I shivered, remembering. "How could he?"

"There was enough left of one of her shoes. That and the compact did the trick."

"He tell you why she was driving my wife's car?"

Martell hesitated. "Not exactly. He said the two women had a date in town for today. He didn't know what time, but Mrs. Wainhope's car was on the fritz, so the theory is that your wife drove out there and picked her up."

"News to me," I said.

He hesitated again. ". . . Any

Illustrator: Gaylord Welker

bad blood between your wife and . . . and Mrs. Wainhope?"

"That's a hell of a question!"

"You want to answer it?" he said quietly.

"You bet I do! They got along fine!"

"If you say so." His voice was mild. "I just don't like this coincidence of Mrs. Kane's being missing at the same time her car goes off a cliff with a friend in it."

"I don't care about that. I want my wife back."

He sighed. "Okay. Give me a description and I'll get out an all-points on her."

I described Donna to him at length and he took it all down and said he'd be in touch with me later. I put back the receiver and went into the living room to make myself a drink. I hadn't eaten a thing since one o'clock that afternoon, but I was too tightened up with worry to be at all hungry.

Time crawled by. I finished my drink while standing at the window, put together a second and took it back into the bedroom and started through the papers from Donna's desk. At 8:15 the phone rang.

"Clay? This is Dave — Dave Wainhope." His voice was flat and not very steady.

I said, "Hello, Dave. Sorry to hear about Helen." It sounded pretty lame, but it was the best I could do at the time.

"You know about it then?"

"Certainly I know about it. It was Donna's car, remember?"

"Of course, Clay." He sounded very tired. "I guess I'm not thinking too clearly. I called you about something else."

"Yeah?"

"Look, Clay, it's none of my business, I suppose. But what's wrong between you and Donna?"

I felt my jaw sag a little. "Who said anything was wrong?"

"All I know is, she was acting awfully strange. She wanted all the ready cash I had on hand, no explanation, no —"

My fingers were biting into the receiver. "Wait a minute!" I shouted. "Dave, listen to me! You *saw* Donna?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. She —"

"When?"

". . . Why, not ten minutes ago. She —"

"Where? Where was she? Where did you see her?"

"Right here. At my office." He was beginning to get excited himself. "I stopped by on my way from the Georgia —"

I cut him off. "Christ, Dave, I've been going nuts! I've been looking for her since four-thirty this afternoon. What'd she say? What kind of trouble is she in?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't tell me anything — just wanted money quick. No checks. I thought maybe you and she had had a

fight or something. I had around nine hundred in the safe; I gave it all to her and she beat —"

I shook the receiver savagely. "But she must have said *something!* She wouldn't just leave without . . . you know . . ."

"She said she sent you a letter earlier in the day."

I dropped down on the desk chair. My hands were shaking and my mouth was dry. "A letter," I said dully. "A letter. Not in person, not even a phone call. Just a letter."

By this time Dave was making comforting sounds. "I'm sure it's nothing serious, Clay. You know how women are. The letter'll probably tell you where she is and you can talk her out of it."

I thanked him and hung up and sat there and stared at my thumb. For some reason I felt even more depressed than before. I couldn't understand why Donna wouldn't have turned to me if she was in trouble. That was always a big thing with us: all difficulties had to be shared. . . .

I went into the kitchen and made myself a couple of cold salami sandwiches and washed them down with another highball. At nine-twenty I telephoned the Hollywood sub-station to let Martell know what Dave Wainhope had told me. Whoever answered said the chief deputy was out and to call back in an hour. I tried to leave a message on what it was about, but was told again to call back and got myself hung up on.

About ten minutes later the buzzer from downstairs sounded. I pushed the button and was standing in the hall door when a young fellow in a postman's gray uniform showed up with a special-delivery letter. I signed for it and closed the door and leaned there and ripped open the envelope.

A single sheet of dime-store paper containing a few neatly typed lines and signed in ink in Donna's usual scrawl.

Clay darling:

I'm terribly sorry, but something that happened a long time ago has come back to plague me and I have to get away for a few days. Please don't try to find me, I'll be all right as long as you trust me.

You know I love you so much that I won't remain away a day longer than I have to. Please don't worry, darling, I'll explain everything the moment I get back.

All my love,

Donna

And that was that. Nothing that I could get my teeth into; no leads, nothing to cut away even a small part of my burden of concern. I walked into the bedroom with no spring in my step and

dropped the letter on the desk and reached for the phone. But there was no point to that. Martell wouldn't be back at the station yet.

Maybe I had missed something. Maybe the envelope was a clue? A clue to what? I looked at it. Carefully. The postmark was Hollywood. That meant it had gone through the branch at Wilcox and Selma. At five-twelve that afternoon. At five-twelve I was just about pulling up behind those department cars out on Stone Canyon Road. She would have had to mail it at the post-office instead of a drop box for me to get it four hours later.

No return address, front or back, as was to be expected. Just a cheap envelope, the kind you pick up at Woolworth's or Kress'. My name and the address neatly typed. The "e" key was twisted very slightly to the right and the "t" was tilted just far enough to be noticeable if you looked at it long enough.

I let the envelope drift out of my fingers and stood there staring down at Donna's letter. My eyes wandered to the other papers next to it. . . .

I said, "Jesus Christ!" You could spend the next ten years in church and never say it more devoutly than I did at that moment. My eyes were locked to one of the letters David Wainhope had written to Donna — and in its typewritten lines two individual characters stood out like bright and shining beacons: a tilted "t" and a twisted "e"!

VI

It took some time — I don't know how much — before I was able to do any straight-line thinking. The fact that those two letters had come out of the same typewriter opened up so many possible paths to the truth behind Donna's disappearance that — well, I was like the mule standing between two stacks of hay.

Finally I simply turned away and walked into the living room and poured a good half inch of bonded bourbon into a glass and drank it down like water after an aspirin. I damned near strangled on the stuff; and by the time I stopped gasping for air and wiping the tears out of my eyes, I was ready to do some thinking.

Back at the desk again, I sat down and picked up the two sheets of paper. A careful comparison removed the last lingering doubt that they had come out of the same machine. Other points began to fall into place: the fact that the typing in Donna's letter had been done by a professional. You can always tell by the even impression of the letters, instead of the dark-light-erasure-strike-over touch you find in an amateur job. And I knew that Donna had

never used a typewriter in her life!

All right, what did it mean? On the surface, simply that somebody had typed the letter for Donna, and at Dave Wainhope's office. It had to be his office, for he would hardly write business letters at home — and besides I was pretty sure Dave was strictly a pen-and-pencil man himself.

Now what? Well, since it was typed in Dave's office, but not by Dave or Donna, it would indicate Dave's secretary had done the work. Does that hold up? It's got to hold up, friend; no one else works in that office but Dave and his secretary.

Let's kind of dig into that a little. Let's say that Donna dropped in on Dave earlier in the afternoon, upset about something. Let's say that Dave is out, so Donna dictates a note to me and the secretary types it out. Very simple. . . . But is it?

No.

And here's why. Here are the holes: first, the note is on dime-store paper, sent in a dime-store envelope. Dave wouldn't have that kind of stationary in his office — not a big-front guy like Dave. Okay, stretch it all the way out; say that Donna had brought her own paper and had the girl use it. You still can't tell me Dave's secretary wouldn't have told her boss about it when he got back to the office. And if she told *him*, he would certainly have told *me* during our phone conversation.

But none of those points compares with the biggest flaw of them all: why would Donna have *any*one type the letter for her when a handwritten note would do just as well — especially on a very private and personal matter like telling your husband you're in trouble?

I got up and walked down the room and lighted a cigarette and looked out the window without seeing anything. A small voice in the back of my mind said, "If all this brain work of yours is right, you know what it adds up to, don't you, pal?"

I knew. Sure, I knew. It meant that Donna Kane was a threat to somebody. It meant that she was being held somewhere; that she had been forced to sign a note to keep me from reporting her disappearance to the cops until whoever was responsible could make a getaway.

It sounded like a bad movie and I tried hard to make myself believe that's all it was. But the more I dug into it, the more I went over the results of my reasoning, the more evident it became that there was no other explanation.

You do only one thing in a case like that. I picked up the phone and called Martell again. He was

still out. I took a stab at telling the desk sergeant, or whoever it was at the other end, what was going on. But it sounded so complex and confused, even to me, that he finally stopped me. "Look, neighbor, call back in about fifteen-twenty minutes. Martell's the man you want to talk to." He hung up before I could give him an argument.

His advice was good and I intended to take it. Amateur detectives usually end up with both feet stuck in their esophagus. This was a police job. My part in it was to let them know what I'd found out, then get out of their way.

That secretary would know. She was in this up to the hilt. I had seen her a few times: a dark-haired girl, quite pretty, a little on the small side but built right. Big blue eyes; I remembered that. Quiet. A little shy, if I remembered right. What was her name? Nora. Nora something. Campbell? Kenton? No. Kemper? That was it: Nora Kemper.

I found her listed in the Central District phone book. In the 300 block on North Hobart, a few doors below Beverly Boulevard. I knew the section. Mostly apartment houses along there. Nothing fancy, but a long way from being a slum. The right neighborhood for private secretaries. As I remembered, she had been married but was now divorced.

I looked at my watch. Less than five minutes since I'd called the sheriff's office. I thought of Donna tied and gagged and stuck away in, say, the trunk of some car. It was more than I could take.

I was on my way out the door when I thought of something else. I went back into the bedroom and dug under a pile of sport shirts in the bottom dresser drawer and took out the gun I'd picked up in San Francisco the year before. It was a Smith & Wesson .38, the model they called the Terrier. I made sure it was loaded, shoved it under the waistband of my slacks in the approved pulp-magazine style and left the apartment.

VII

It was a quiet street, bordered with tall palms, not much in the way of street lights. Both curbs were lined with cars and I had to park half a block down and across the way from the number I wanted.

I got out and walked slowly back through the darkness. I was a little jittery, but that was to be expected. Radio music drifted from a bungalow court and a woman laughed thinly. A couple passed me, arm in arm, the man in an army officer's uniform. I didn't see anyone else around.

The number I was after belonged to a good-sized apartment building, three floors and three

separate entrances. Five stone steps, flanked by a wrought-iron balustrade, up to the front door. A couple of squat Italian cypresses in front of the landing.

There was no one in the foyer. In the light from a yellow bulb in a ceiling fixture I could make out the names above the bell buttons. Nora Kemper's apartment was 205. Automatically I reached for the button, then hesitated. There was no inner door to block off the stairs. Why not go right on up and knock on her door? No warning, no chance for her to think up answers before I asked the questions.

I walked up the carpeted steps to the second floor and on down the hall. It was very quiet. Soft light from overhead fixtures glinted on pale green walls and dark green doors. At the far end of the hall a large window looked out on the night sky.

Number 205 was well down the corridor. No light showed under the edge of the door. I pushed a thumb against a small pearl button set flush in the jamb and heard a single flatted bell note.

Nothing happened. No answering steps, no questioning voice. A telephone rang twice in one of the other apartments and a car horn sounded from the street below.

I tried the bell again, with the same result. Now what? Force the door? No sense to that, and besides illegal entry was against the law. I wouldn't know how to go about it anyway.

She would have to come home eventually. Thing to do was stake out somewhere and wait for her to show up. If she didn't arrive within the next half hour, say, then I would hunt up a phone and call Martell.

I went back to the stairs and was on the point of descending to the first floor when I heard the street door close and light steps against the tile flooring down there. It could be Nora Kemper. Moving silently, I took the steps to the third floor and stood close to the wall where the light failed to reach.

A woman came quickly up the steps to the second floor. From where I stood I couldn't see her face clearly, but her build and the color of her hair were right. She was wearing a light coat and carrying a white drawstring bag, and she was in a hurry. She turned in the right direction, and the moment she was out of sight I raced back to the second floor.

It was Nora Kemper, all right: She was standing in front of the door to 205 and digging into her bag for the key. I had a picture of her getting inside and closing the door and refusing to let me in.

I said, "Hold it a minute, Miss Kemper."

She jerked her head up and

around, startled. I moved toward her slowly. When the light reached my face, she gasped and made a frantic jab into the bag, yanked out her keys and tried hurriedly to get one of them into the lock.

I couldn't afford to have that door between us. I brought the gun out and said sharply, "Stay right there. I want to talk to you."

The hand holding the keys dropped limply to her side. She began to back away, retreating toward the dead end of the corridor. Her face gleamed whitely, set in a frozen mask of fear.

She stopped only when she could go no farther. Her back pressed hard against the wall next to the window, her eyes rolled, showing the whites.

Her voice came out in a ragged whisper. "Wha-what do you want?"

I said, "You know me, Miss Kemper. You know who I am. What are you afraid of?"

Her eyes wavered, dropped to the .38 in my hand. "The gun. I —"

"Hunh-uh," I said. "You were scared stiff before I brought it out. Recognizing me is what scared you. Why?"

Her lips shook. Against the pallor of her skin they looked almost black. "I don't know what . . . Don't stand . . . Please. Let me go."

She tried to squeeze past me. I reached out and grabbed her by one arm. She gasped and jerked away — and her open handbag fell to the floor, spilling the contents.

She started after them, but I was there ahead of her. I had seen something — something that shook me like a solid right to the jaw.

Three of them, close together on the carpet. I scooped them up and straightened and jerked Nora Kemper around to face me. I shoved my open hand in front of her eyes, letting her see what was in it.

"Keys!" I said hoarsely. "Take a good look, lady! They came out of your purse. The keys to my apartment, my mailbox. *My wife's keys!*"

A small breeze would have knocked her down. I took a long look at her stricken expression, then I put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her ahead of me down the hall. I didn't have to tell her what I wanted: she unlocked the door and we went in.

When the lights were on, she sank down on the couch. I stood over her, still holding the gun. My face must have told her what was going on behind it, for she began to shake uncontrollably.

I said, "I'm a man in the dark, Miss Kemper. I'm scared, and when I get scared I get mad. If you don't want a mouth full of busted teeth, tell me one thing: *where is my wife?*"

She had sense enough to believe me. She gasped and drew back. "He didn't tell me," she wailed. "I only did what he told me to do, Mr. Kane."

"What *who* told you?"

"David. Mr. Wainhope."

I breathed in and out. "You wrote that letter?"

". . . Yes."

"Did you see my wife sign it?"

She wet her lips. "She wasn't there. David signed it. There are samples of her signature at the office. He copied from one of them."

I hadn't thought of that. "What's behind all this?"

"I — I don't know." She couldn't take her eyes off the gun. "Really I don't, Mr. Kane."

"You know a hell of a lot more than I do," I growled. "Start at the beginning and give it to me. All of it."

She pushed a wick of black hair off her forehead. Some of the color was beginning to seep back into her cheeks, but her eyes were still clouded with fear.

"When I got back to the office from lunch this afternoon," she said, "David was out. He called me a little after three and told me to meet him at the corner of Fountain and Courtney. I was to take the Hollywood street car instead of a cab and wait for him there."

"Did he say why?"

"No. He sounded nervous, upset. I was there within fifteen minutes, but he didn't show up until almost a quarter to four."

"Go on," I said when she hesitated.

"Well, we went into an apartment building on Fountain. Dave took out some keys and used one of them to take mail out of a box with your name on it. Then he unlocked the inner door and we went up to your apartment. He had the key to it, too. He gave me the keys and we went into the bedroom. He told me to call you and what to say. Before that, though, he hunted up the vacuum cleaner and started it going. Then I talked to you on the phone."

I stared at her. "You did fine. The cleaner kept me from realizing it wasn't Donna's voice, and I suppose at one time or another Helen must've found out Donna called me 'Poopsie' and told Dave about it. Big laugh! What happened after that?"

Her hands were clenched in her lap, whitening the knuckles. Her small breasts rose and fell under quick shallow breathing. Fear had taken most of the beauty out of her face.

"Dave opened one of the letters he had brought upstairs," she said tonelessly, "and left it next to the phone. We went back downstairs and drove back to the office. On the way Dave stopped off and bought some cheap stationery. I

used some of it to write that letter. He told me to mail it at the post office right away, then he walked out. I haven't seen him since."

"Secretaries like you," I said sourly, "must take some finding. Whatever the boss says goes. You don't find 'em like that around the broadcasting studios."

Her head swung up sharply. "I happen to love Dave . . . and he loves me. We're going to be married — now that he's free."

My face ached from keeping my expression unchanged. "How nice for both of you. Only he's got a wife, remember?"

She looked at me soberly. "Didn't you know about that?"

"About what?"

"Helen Wainhope. She was killed in an automobile accident this afternoon."

"When did you hear that?"

"David told me when he called in around three o'clock."

I let my eyes drift to the gun in my hand. There was no point in flashing it around any longer. I slid it into one of my coat pockets and fished a cigarette out and used a green and gold table lighter to get it going. I said, "And all this hocus-pocus about signing my wife's name to a phony letter, calling me on the phone and pretending to be her — all this on the same day Dave Wainhope's wife dies — and you don't even work up a healthy curiosity? I find that hard to believe, Miss Kemper. You must have known he was into something way over his head."

"I love David," she said simply.

I blew out some smoke. "Love isn't good for a girl like you. Leave it alone. It makes you stupid. Good night, Miss Kemper."

She didn't move. A tear began to trace a jagged curve along her left cheek. I left her sitting there and went over to the door and out, closing it softly behind me.

VIII

At eleven o'clock at night there's not much traffic on Sunset, especially when you get out past the bright two-mile stretch of the Strip with its Technicolor neons, its plush nightclubs crowded with columnists and casting-couch starlets and vacationing Iowans, its modernistic stucco buildings with agents' names in stylized lettering across the fronts. I drove by them and dropped on down into Beverly Hills where most of the homes were dark at this hour, through Brentwood where a lot of stars hide out in big estates behind hedges and burglar alarms, and finally all that was behind me and I turned off Sunset onto Beverly Glen Boulevard and followed the climbing curves up into the foothills to the north.

The pattern was beginning to form. Dave Wainhope had known

his wife was dead long before Sheriff Martell drove out to break the news to him. I saw that as meaning one thing: he must have had a hand in that "accident" on Stone Canyon Road. He could have driven out there with Helen, then let the car roll over the lip of the canyon with her in it. The motive was an old, old one: in love with another woman and his wife in the way.

That left only Donna's disappearance to account for. In a loose way I had that figured out too. She might have arrived at Dave's home at the wrong time. I saw her walking in and seeing too much and getting herself bound and gagged and tucked away somewhere while Dave finished the job. Why he had used Donna's car to stage the accident was something I couldn't fit in for sure, although Sheriff Martell had mentioned that Helen's car hadn't been working.

It added up — and in the way it added up was the proof that Donna was still alive. Even with the certainty that Dave Wainhope had coldbloodedly sent his wife plunging to a horrible death, I was equally sure he had not harmed Donna. Otherwise the obvious move would have been to place her in the car with Helen and drop them both over the edge. A nice clean job, no witnesses, no complications. Two friends on their way into town, a second of carelessness in negotiating a dangerous curve — and the funeral will be held Tuesday!

The more I thought of it, the more trouble I was having in fitting Dave Wainhope into the role of murderer at all. He was on the short side, thick in the waistline, balding, and with the round guileless face you find on some infants. As far as I knew he had never done anything more violent in his life than refuse to tip a waiter.

None of that proved anything, of course. If murders were committed only by people who looked the part, there would be a lot more pinochle played in Homicide Bureaus.

I turned off Beverly Glen at one of the narrow unpaved roads well up into the hills and began to zigzag across the countryside. The dank smell of the distant sea drifted in through the open windows, bringing with it the too-sweet odor of sage blossoms. The only sounds were the quiet purr of the motor and the rattle of loose stones against the underside of the fenders.

Then suddenly I was out in the open, with Stone Canyon Reservoir below me behind a border of scrub oak and manzanita and the sheen of moonlight on water. On my left, higher up, bulked a dark sharp-angled building of wood and stone and glass among flowering

shrubs and bushes and more of the scrub oak. I followed a graveled driveway around a sweeping half-circle and pulled up alongside the porch.

I cut off the motor and sat there. Water gurgled in the radiator. With the headlights off, the night closed in on me. A bird said something in its sleep and there was a brief rustling among the bushes.

The house stood big and silent. Not a light showed. I put my hand into my pocket next to the gun and got out onto the gravel. It crunched under my shoes on my way to the porch. I went up eight steps and across the flagstones and turned the big brass doorknob.

Locked. I hadn't expected it not to be. I shrugged and put a finger against the bell and heard a strident buzz inside that seemed to rock the building.

No lights came on. I waited a minute or two, then tried again, holding the button down for what seemed a long time. All it did was use up some of the battery.

Now what? I tried to imagine David Wainhope crouched among the portieres with his hands full of guns, but it wouldn't come off. The more obvious answer would be the right one: he simply wasn't home.

I wondered if he would be coming home at all. By now he might be half way to Mexico, with a bundle of his clients' cash in the back seat and no intention of setting foot in the States ever again. He would have to get away before somebody found Donna Kane and turned her loose to tell what had actually happened. I had a sharp picture of her trussed up and shoved under one of the beds. It was all I needed.

I walked over to one of the porch windows and tried it. It was fastened on the inside. I took out my gun and tapped the butt hard against the glass. It shattered with a sound like the breaking up of an ice jam. I reached through and turned the catch and slid the frame up far enough for me to step over the sill.

Nobody else around. I moved through the blackness until I found an arched doorway and a light switch on the wall next to that.

I was in a living room which ran the full length of the house. Modern furniture scattered tastefully about. Sponge-rubber easy chairs in pastel shades. An enormous wood-burning fireplace. Framed Greenwich Village smears grouped on one wall. A shiny black baby grand with a tasselled gold scarf across it and a picture of Helen Wainhope in a leather frame. Everything looked neat and orderly and recently dusted.

I walked on down the room and through another archway into a

dining room. Beyond it was a hall into the back of the house, with three bedrooms, one of them huge, the others ordinary in size with a connecting bath. I went through all of them. The closets had nothing in them but clothing. There was nothing under the beds, not even a little honest dirt. Everything had a place and everything was in its place.

The kitchen was white and large, with all the latest gadgets. Off it was a service porch, with a refrigerator, a deep freeze big enough to hold a body (but without one in it), and a washing machine. The house was heated with gas, with a central unit under the house. No basement.

Donna was still missing.

I left the lights on and went outside and around the corner of the house to the three-car garage. The foldback doors were closed and locked, but a side entrance wasn't. One car inside: a gray Pontiac convertible I recognized as Helen's. Nobody in it and the trunk was locked. I gave the lid a half-hearted rap and said, "Donna? Are you in there?"

No answer. No wild drumming of heels, no threshing about. No sound at all except the blood rushing through my veins and I probably imagined that.

Right then I knew I was licked. He had hidden her somewhere else or he had taken her with him. That last made no sense at all, but then he probably wasn't thinking sensibly.

Nothing left but to call the sheriff and let him know how much I'd learned and how little I'd found. I should have done that long before this. I went back to the house to hunt up the telephone. I remembered seeing it on a nightstand in one of the bedrooms and I walked slowly back along the hall to learn which one.

Halfway down I spotted a narrow door I had missed the first time. I opened it and a light went on automatically. A utility closet, fairly deep, shelves loaded with luggage and blankets, a couple of electric heaters stored away for use on the long winter nights. And that was all.

I was on the point of leaving when I noticed that a sizable portion of the flooring was actually a removable trap door. I bent down and tugged it loose and slid it to one side, revealing a cement-lined recess about five feet deep and a good eight feet square. Stone steps, four of them, very steep, went down into it. In there was the central gas furnace and a network of flat pipes extending in all directions. The only illumination came from the small naked bulb over my head and at first I could see nothing beyond the unit itself.

My eyes began to get used to the dimness. Something else was down there on the cement next to

the furnace. Something dark and shapeless. . . . A pale oval seemed to swell and float up toward me.

"Donna!" I croaked. "My good God, it's Donna!"

I half fell down the stone steps and lifted the lifeless body into my arms. Getting back up those steps and along the hall to the nearest bedroom is something I would never remember.

And then she was on the bed and I was staring down at her. My heart seemed to leap once and shudder to a full stop and a wordless cry tore at my throat.

The girl on the bed was Helen Wainhope!

IX

I once heard it said that a man's life is made up of many small deaths, the least of them being the final one. I stood there looking at the dead woman, remembering the charred ruins of another body beside a twisted heap of blackened metal, and in that moment a part of me stumbled and fell and whimpered and died.

The telephone was there, waiting. I looked at it for a long time. Then I took a slow uneven breath and shook my head to clear it and picked up the receiver.

"Put it down, Clay."

I turned slowly. He was standing in the doorway, holding a gun down low, his round face drawn and haggard.

I said, "You killed her, you son of a bitch."

He wet his lips nervously. "Put it down, Clay. I can't let you call the police."

It didn't matter. Not really. Nothing mattered any more except that he was standing where I could reach him. I let the receiver drop back into place. "Like something left in the oven too long," I said. "That's how I have to remember her."

I started toward him. Not fast. I was in no hurry. The longer it lasted, the more I would like it.

He brought the gun up sharply. "Don't make me shoot you. Stay right there. Please, Clay."

I stopped. It took more than I had to walk into the muzzle of a gun. You have to be crazy, I guess, and I wasn't that crazy.

He began to talk, his tongue racing, the words spilling out. "I didn't kill Donna, Clay. It was an accident. You've got to believe that, Clay! I liked her; I always liked Donna. You know that."

I could feel my lips twisting into a crooked line. "Sure. You always liked Donna. You always liked me, too. Put down the gun, Dave."

He wasn't listening. A muscle twitched high up on his left cheek. "You've got to understand how it happened, Clay. It was quick,

like a nightmare. I want you to know about it, to understand that I didn't intend . . ."

There was a gun in my pocket. I thought of it and I nodded. "I'm listening, Dave."

His eyes flicked to the body on the bed, then back to me. They were tired eyes, a little wild, the whites bloodshot. "Not in here," he said. He moved to one side. "Go into the living room. Ahead of me. Don't do anything . . . foolish."

I went past him and on along the hall. He was close behind me, but not close enough. In the silence I could hear him breathing.

I sat down on a sponge-rubber chair without arms. I said, "I'd like a cigarette, Dave. You know, to steady my nerves. I'm very nervous right now. You know how it is. I'll just put my hand in my pocket and take one out. Will that be all right with you?"

He said, "Go ahead," not caring, not even really listening.

Very slowly I let my hand slide into the side pocket of my coat. His gun went on pointing at me. The muzzle looked as big as the Second Street tunnel. My fingers brushed against the grip of the .38. A knuckle touched the trigger guard and the chill feel was like an electric shock. His gun went on staring at me.

My hand came out again. Empty. I breathed a shallow breath and took a cigarette and my matches from behind my display handkerchief. My forehead was wet. Whatever heroes had, I didn't have it. I struck a match and lighted the cigarette and blew out a long plume of smoke. My hand wasn't shaking as much as I had expected.

"Tell me about it," I said.

He perched on the edge of the couch across from me, a little round man in a painful blue suit, white shirt, gray tie and brown pointed shoes. He had never been one to go in for casual dress like everyone else in Southern California. Lamp light glistened along his scalp below the receding hairline and the muscle in his cheek twanged spasmodically.

"You knew Helen," he said in a kind of far-away voice. "She was a wonderful woman. We were married twelve years, Clay. I must have been crazy. But I'm not making much sense, am I?" He tried to smile but it broke on him.

I blew out some more smoke and said nothing. He looked at the gun as though he had never seen it before, but he kept on pointing it at me.

"About eight months ago," he continued, "I made some bad investments with my own money. I tried to get it back by other investments, this time with Donna's money. It was very foolish of me. I lost that, too."

He shook his head with slow regret. "It was quite a large sum,

Clay. But I wasn't greatly worried. Things would break right before long and I could put it back. And then Helen found out about it. . . .

"She loved me, Clay. But she wouldn't stand for my dipping into Donna's money. She said unless I made good the shortage immediately she would tell Donna. If anything like that got out it would ruin me. I promised I would do it within two or three weeks."

He stopped there and the room was silent. A breeze came in at the open window and rustled the drapes.

"Then," David Wainhope said, "something else happened, something that ruined everything. This isn't easy for me to say, but . . . well, I was having an . . . affair with my secretary. Miss Kemper. A lovely girl. You met her."

"Yes," I said. "I met her."

"I thought we were being very — well, careful. But Helen is — was a smart woman, Clay. She suspected something and she hired a private detective. I had no idea, of course. . . .

"Today, Helen called me at the office. I was alone; Miss Kemper was at lunch. Helen seemed very upset; she told me to get home immediately if I knew what was good for me. That's the way she put it: 'if you know what's good for you!' "

I said, "Uh-*hunh*!" and went on looking at the gun.

"Naturally, I went home at once. When I got here, Donna was just getting out of her car in front. Helen's convertible was also in the driveway, so I put my car in the garage and came into the living room. I was terribly upset, feeling that Helen was going to tell Donna about the money.

"They were standing over there, in front of the fireplace. Helen was furious; I had never seen her quite so furious before. She told me she was going to tell Donna everything. I pleaded with her not to. Donna, of course, didn't know what was going on.

"Helen told her about the shortage, Clay. Right there in front of me. Donna took it better than I'd hoped. She said she would have to get someone else to look after her affairs but that she didn't intend to press charges against me. That was when Helen really lost her temper.

"She said she was going to sue me for divorce and name Miss Kemper; that she had hired a private detective and he had given her a report that same morning. She started to tell me all the things the detective had told her. Right in front of Donna. I shouted for her to stop but she went right on. I couldn't stand it, Clay. I picked up the poker and I hit her. Just once, on the head. I didn't know what I was doing. It — it was like a reflex. She died on the

floor at my feet."

I said, "What am I supposed to do — feel sorry for you?"

He looked at me woodenly. I might as well have spoken to the wall. "Donna was terribly frightened. I think she screamed, then she turned and ran out of the house. I heard her car start before I realized she would tell them I killed Helen.

"I ran out, shouting for her to wait, to listen to me. But she was already turning into the road. My car was in the garage, so I jumped into Helen's and went after her. I wasn't going to do anything to her, Clay; I just wanted her to understand that I hadn't meant to kill Helen, that it only happened that way.

"By the time we reached that curve on Stone Canyon I was close behind her. She was driving too fast and the car skidded on the turn and went over. I could hear it. All the way down I heard it. I'll never get that sound out of my mind."

I shivered and closed my eyes. There was no emotion in me any more — only a numbness that would never really go away.

His unsteady voice went on and on. "She must have died instantly. The whole front of her face. . . . My mind began to work fast. If I could make the police think it was my wife who had died in the accident, then I could hide Helen's

body and nobody would know. That way Donna would be the one missing and they'd ask you questions, not me.

"The wreckage was saturated with gasoline. I — I threw a match into it. The fire couldn't hurt her, Clay. She was already dead. I swear it. Then I went up to the car and looked through it for something of Helen's I could leave near the scene.

"I came back here," he went on tonelessly, "and hid Helen's body. And all the time thoughts kept spinning through my head. Nobody must doubt that it was Helen in that car. If I could just convince you that Donna was not only alive *after* the accident, but that she had gone away . . .

"It came to me almost at once. I don't know from where. Maybe when staying alive depends on quick thinking, another part of your mind takes over. Miss Kemper would have to help me —"

I waved a hand, stopping him. "I know all about that. She told me. And for Christ's sake stop calling her Miss Kemper! You've been sleeping with her — remember?"

He was staring at me." She told you? Why? I was sure —"

"You made a mistake," I said. "That note you signed Donna's name to was typed on the office machine. When I found that out I called on your Miss Kemper. She told me enough to get me started on the right track."

The gun was very steady in his hand now. Hollows deepened under his cheeks. "You — you told the police?"

"Certainly."

He shook his head. "No. You didn't tell them. They would be here now if you had." He stood up slowly, with a kind of quiet agony. "I'm sorry, Clay."

My throat began to tighten. "The hell with being sorry. I know. I'm the only one left. The only one who can put you in that gas chamber out at San Quentin. Now you make it number three."

His face seemed strangely at peace. "I've told you what happened. I wanted you to hear it from me, exactly the way it happened. I wanted you to know I couldn't deliberately kill anyone."

He turned the gun around and reached out and laid it in my hand. He said, "I suppose you had better call the police now."

I looked stupidly down at the gun and then back at him. He had forgotten me. He settled back on the couch and put his hands gently down on his knees and stared past me at the night sky beyond the windows.

I wanted to feel sorry for him. But I couldn't. It was too soon. Maybe some day I would be able to.

After a while I got up and went into the bedroom and put through the call.

MIRIAM
A
CLASSIC
Reprint
BY TRUMAN CAPOTE

MIRIAM

BY TRUMAN CAPOTE

This is a tale of terror. Not of coffins in the old churchyard where shrouded figures lurk behind rotting tombstones, but the terror that can stroll the city streets in a plum-colored coat and a white silk dress. At the hands of a master storyteller a small girl named Miriam emerges as a creature more frightening than Dracula and Frankenstein rolled into one.

If you live alone, this is no bedtime story. Instead, take it to the city morgue and read it among bright lights and plenty of company. For even the dead will make better companions than this child with the perfect manners and a soul from the pits of Hell. With Miriam, Truman Capote won an O. Henry Award. We'll bet the judges' teeth were chattering as they handed it over!

FOR several years, Mrs. H. T. Miller had lived alone in a pleasant apartment (two rooms with kitchenette) in a remodeled brownstone near the East River. She was a widow: Mr. H. T. Miller had left her a reasonable amount of insurance. Her interests were narrow, she had no friends to speak of, and she rarely journeyed farther than the corner grocery. The other people in the house never seemed to notice her: her clothes were matter-of-fact, her hair iron-gray, clipped and casually waved; she did not use cosmetics, her features were plain and inconspicuous, and on her last birthday she was sixty-one. Her activities were seldom spontaneous; she kept the two rooms immaculate, smoked an occasional

Miriam — Copyright, 1945, by Truman Capote. Published originally by Street & Smith in *Mademoiselle* — reserving first North American Serial Rights.

cigarette, prepared her own meals and tended a canary.

Then she met Miriam. It was snowing that night. Mrs. Miller had finished drying the supper dishes and was thumbing through an afternoon paper when she saw an advertisment of a picture playing at a neighborhood theater. The title sounded good, so she struggled into her beaver coat, laced her galoshes and left the apartment, leaving one light burning in the foyer: she found nothing more disturbing than a sensation of darkness.

The snow was fine, falling gently, not yet making an impression on the pavement. The wind from the river cut only at street crossings. Mrs. Miller hurried, her head bowed, oblivious as a mole burrowing a blind path. She stopped at a drugstore and bought a package of peppermints.

A long line stretched in front of the box office; she took her place at the end. There would be (a tired voice groaned) a short wait for all seats. Mrs. Miller rummaged in her leather handbag till she collected exactly the correct change for admission. The line seemed to be taking its own time and, looking around for some distraction, she suddenly became conscious of a little girl standing under the edge of the marquee.

Her hair was the longest and strangest Mrs. Miller had ever seen: absolutely silver-white, like an albino's. It flowed waist-length in smooth, loose lines. She was thin and fragilely constructed. There was a simple, special elegance in the way she stood with her thumbs in the pockets of a tailored plum-velvet coat.

Mrs. Miller felt oddly excited, and when the little girl glanced toward her, she smiled warmly. The little girl walked over and said, "Would you care to do me a favor?"

"I'd be glad to, if I can," said Mrs. Miller.

"Oh, it's quite easy. I merely want you to buy a ticket for me; they won't let me in otherwise. Here, I have the money." And gracefully she handed Mrs. Miller two dimes and a nickel.

They went into the theater together. An usherette directed them to a lounge; in twenty minutes the picture would be over.

"I feel just like a genuine criminal," said Mrs. Miller gaily, as she sat down. "I mean that sort of thing's against the law, isn't it? I do hope I haven't done the wrong thing. Your mother knows where you are, dear? I mean she does, doesn't she?"

The little girl said nothing. She unbuttoned her coat and folded it across her lap. Her dress underneath was prim and dark blue. A gold chain dangled about her neck, and her fingers, sensitive and musical-looking, toyed with

it. Examining her more attentively, Mrs. Miller decided the truly distinctive feature was not her hair, but her eyes; they were hazel, steady, lacking any childlike quality whatsoever and, because of their size, seemed to consume her small face.

Mrs. Miller offered a peppermint. "What's your name, dear?"

"Miriam," she said, as though, in some curious way, it were information already familiar.

"Why, isn't that funny — my name's Miriam, too. And it's not a terribly common name either. Now, don't tell me your last name's Miller!"

"Just Miriam."

"But isn't that funny?"

"Moderately," said Miriam, and rolled the peppermint on her tongue.

Mrs. Miller flushed and shifted uncomfortably. "You have such a large vocabulary for such a little girl."

"Do I?"

"Well, yes," said Mrs. Miller, hastily changing the topic to: "Do you like the movies?"

"I really wouldn't know," said Miriam. "I've never been before."

Women began filling the lounge; the rumble of the newsreel bombs exploded in the distance. Mrs. Miller rose, tucking her purse under her arm. "I guess I'd better be running now if I want to get a seat," she said. "It was nice to have met you."

Miriam nodded ever so slightly.

It snowed all week. Wheels and footsteps moved soundlessly on the street, as if the business of living continued secretly behind a pale but impenetrable curtain. In the falling quiet there was no sky or earth, only snow lifting in the wind, frosting the window glass, chilling the rooms, deadening and hushing the city. At all hours it was necessary to keep a lamp lighted and Mrs. Miller lost track of the days; Friday was no different from Saturday and on Sunday she went to the grocery; closed, of course.

That evening she scrambled eggs and fixed a bowl of tomato soup. Then, after putting on a flannel robe and cold-creaming her face, she propped herself up in bed with a hot-water bottle under her feet. She was reading the *TIMES* when the doorbell rang. At first she thought it must be a mistake and whoever it was would go away. But it rang and rang and settled to a persistent buzz. She looked at the clock: a little after eleven; it did not seem possible, she was always asleep by ten.

Climbing out of bed, she trotted barefoot across the living room, "I'm coming, please be patient." The latch was caught; she turned it this way and that way and the bell never paused an instant. "Stop it," she cried. The bolt gave way and she opened the door

an inch. "What in heaven's name?"

"Hello," said Miriam.

"Oh . . . why, hello," said Mrs. Miller, stepping hesitantly into the hall. "You're that little girl."

"I thought you'd never answer, but I kept my finger on the button; I knew you were home. Aren't you glad to see me?"

Mrs. Miller did not know what to say. Miriam, she saw, wore the same plum-velvet coat and now she had also a beret to match; her white hair was braided in two shining plaits and looped at the ends with enormous white ribbons.

"Since I've waited so long, you could at least let me in," she said.

"It's awfully late. . . ."

Miriam regarded her blankly. "What difference does that make? Let me in. It's cold out here and I have on a silk dress." Then, with a gentle gesture, she urged Mrs. Miller aside and passed into the apartment.

She dropped her coat and beret on a chair. She was indeed wearing a silk dress. White silk. White silk in February. The skirt was beautifully pleated and the sleeves long. It made a faint rustle as she strolled about the room. "I like your place," she said, "I like the rug, blue's my favorite color." She touched a paper rose in a vase on the coffee table. "Imitation," she commented wanly. "How sad. Aren't imitations sad?" She seated herself on the sofa, daintily spreading her skirt.

"What do you want?" asked Mrs. Miller.

"Sit down," said Miriam. "It makes me nervous to see people stand."

Mrs. Miller sank to a hassock. "What do you want?" she repeated.

"You know, I don't think you're glad I came."

For a second time Mrs. Miller was without an answer; her hand motioned vaguely. Miriam giggled and pressed back on a mound of chintz pillows. Mrs. Miller observed that the girl was less pale than she remembered; her cheeks were flushed.

"How did you know where I lived?"

Miriam frowned. "That's no question at all. What's your name? What's mine?"

"But I'm not listed in the phone book."

"Oh, let's talk about something else."

Mrs. Miller said, "Your mother must be insane to let a child like you wander around at all hours of the night — and in such ridiculous clothes. She must be out of her mind."

Miriam got up and moved to a corner where a covered bird cage hung from a ceiling chain. She peeked beneath the cover. "It's

a canary," she said. "Would you mind if I woke him? I'd like to hear him sing."

"Leave Tommy alone," said Mrs. Miller, anxiously. "Don't you dare wake him."

"Certainly," said Miriam. "But I don't see why I can't hear him sing." And then, "Have you anything to eat? I'm starving! Even milk and a jam sandwich would be fine."

"Look," said Mrs. Miller, arising from the hassock, "look — if I make some nice sandwiches will you be a good child and run along home? It's past midnight, I'm sure."

"It's snowing," reproached Miriam. "And cold and dark."

"Well, you shouldn't have come here to begin with," said Mrs. Miller, struggling to control her voice. "I can't help the weather. If you want anything to eat you'll have to promise to leave."

Miriam brushed a braid against her cheek. Her eyes were thoughtful, as if weighing the proposition. She turned toward the bird cage. "Very well," she said, "I promise."

How old is she? Ten? Eleven? Mrs. Miller, in the kitchen, unsealed a jar of strawberry preserves and cut four slices of bread. She poured a glass of milk and paused to light a cigarette. And why had she come? Her hand shook as she held the match, fascinated, till it burned her finger. The canary was singing; singing as he did in the morning and at no other time. "Miriam," she called, "Miriam, I told you not to disturb Tommy." There was no answer. She called again; all she heard was the canary. She inhaled the cigarette and discovered she had lighted the cork-tip end and — oh, really, she mustn't lose her temper.

She carried the food in on a tray and set it on the coffee table. She saw first the bird cage still wore its night cover. And Tommy was singing. It gave her a queer sensation. And no one was in the room. Mrs. Miller went through an alcove leading to her bedroom; at the door she caught her breath.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Miriam glanced up and in her eyes there was a look that was not ordinary. She was standing by the bureau, a jewel case opened before her. For a few minutes she studied Mrs. Miller, forcing their eyes to meet, and she smiled. "There's nothing good here," she said. "But I like this." Her hand held a cameo brooch. "It's charming."

"Suppose — perhaps you'd better put it back," said Mrs. Miller, feeling suddenly the need of some support. She leaned against the door frame; her head was unbearably heavy; a pressure weighted the rhythm of her heartbeat. The light seemed to flutter

defectively. "Please, child — a gift from my husband . . ."

"But it's beautiful and I want it," said Miriam. "Give it to me."

As she stood, striving to shape a sentence which would somehow save the brooch, it came to Mrs. Miller there was no one to whom she might turn; she was alone; a fact that had not been among her thoughts for a long time. Its sheer emphasis was stunning. But here in her own room in the hushed snow-city were evidences she could not ignore or, she knew with startling clarity, resist.

Miriam ate ravenously, and when the sandwiches and milk were gone, her fingers made cobweb movements over the plate, gathering crumbs. The cameo gleamed on her blouse, the blonde profile like a trick reflection of its wearer. "That was very nice," she sighed, "though now an almond cake or a cherry would be ideal. Sweets are lovely, don't you think?"

Mrs. Miller was perched precariously on the hassock, smoking a cigarette. Her hair net had slipped lopsided and loose strands straggled down her face. Her eyes were stupidly concentrated on nothing and her cheeks were mottled in red patches, as though a fierce slap had left permanent marks.

"Is there a candy — a cake?"

Mrs. Miller tapped ash on the rug. Her head swayed slightly as she tried to focus her eyes. "You promised to leave if I made the sandwiches," she said.

"Dear me, did I?"

"It was a promise and I'm tired and I don't feel well at all."

"Mustn't fret," said Miriam. "I'm only teasing."

She picked up her coat, slung it over her arm, and arranged her beret in front of a mirror. Presently she bent close to Mrs. Miller and whispered, "Kiss me good night."

"Please — I'd rather not," said Mrs. Miller.

Miriam lifted a shoulder, arched an eyebrow. "As you like," she said, and went directly to the coffee table, seized the vase containing the paper roses, carried it to where the hard surface of the floor lay bare, and hurled it downward. Glass sprayed in all directions and she stamped her foot on the bouquet.

Then slowly she walked to the door, but before closing it she looked back at Mrs. Miller with a slyly innocent curiosity.

Mrs. Miller spent the next day in bed, rising once to feed the canary and drink a cup of tea; she took her temperature and had none, yet her dreams were feverishly agitated; their unbalanced mood lingered even as she lay staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. One dream threaded through the

others like an elusively mysterious theme in a complicated symphony, and the scenes it depicted were sharply outlined, as though sketched by a hand of gifted intensity; a small girl wearing a bridal gown and a wreath of leaves, led a gray procession down a mountain path, and among them there was unusual silence till a woman at the rear asked, "Where is she taking us?" "No one knows," said an old man marching in front. "But isn't she pretty?" volunteered a third voice. "Isn't she like a frost flower . . . so shining and white?"

Tuesday morning she woke up feeling better; harsh slats of sunlight, slanting through Venetian blinds, shed a disrupting light on her unwholesome fancies. She opened the window to discover a thawed, mild-as-spring day; a sweep of clean new clouds crumpled against a vastly blue, out-of-season sky; and across the low line of rooftops she could see the river and smoke curving from tugboat stacks in a warm wind. A great silver truck plowed the snow-banked street, its machine sound humming in the air.

After straightening the apartment, she went to the grocer's, cashed a check and continued to Schrafft's where she ate breakfast and chatted happily with the waitress. Oh, it was a wonderful day — more like a holiday — and it would be foolish to go home.

She boarded a Lexington Avenue bus and rode up to Eighty-sixth Street; it was here that she had decided to do a little shopping.

She had no idea what she wanted or needed, but she idled along, intent only upon the passers-by, brisk and preoccupied, who gave her a disturbing sense of separateness.

It was while waiting at the corner of Third Avenue that she saw the man; an old man, bow-legged and stooped under an armload of bulging packages; he wore a shabby brown coat and a checkered cap. Suddenly she realized they were exchanging a smile: there was nothing friendly about this smile, it was two cold flickers of recognition. But she was certain she had never seen him before. He was standing next to an El pillar, and as she crossed the street he turned and followed. He kept quite close; from the corner of her eye she watched his reflection wavering on the shopwindows.

Then in the middle of the block she stopped and faced him. He stopped also and cocked his head, grinning. But what could she say? Do? Here, in broad daylight, on Eighty-sixth Street? It was useless and, despising her own helplessness, she quickened her steps.

Now, Second Avenue is a dismal street, made from scraps and ends; part cobblestone, part asphalt, part cement; and its atmosphere

Illustrator: David Stone

of desertion is permanent. Mrs. Miller walked five blocks without meeting anyone, and all the while the steady crunch of his footfalls in the snow stayed near. And when she came to a florist's shop, the sound was still with her. She hurried inside and watched through the glass door as the old man passed; he kept his eyes straight ahead and didn't slow his pace, but he did one strange, telling thing; he tipped his cap.

"Six white ones, did you say?" asked the florist. "Yes," she told him, "white roses." From there she went to a glassware store and selected a vase, presumably a replacement for the one Miriam had broken, thought the price was intolerable and the vase itself (she thought) grotesquely vulgar. But a series of unaccountable purchases had begun, as if by prearranged plan: a plan of which she had not the least knowledge or control.

She bought a bag of glazed cherries, and at a place called the Knickerbocker Bakery she paid forty cents for six almond cakes.

Within the last hour the weather had turned cold again; like blurred lenses, winter clouds cast a shade over the sun, and the skeleton of an early dusk colored the sky; a damp mist mixed with the wind and the voices of a few children who romped high on mountains of gutter snow, seemed lonely and cheerless. Soon the first flake fell, and when Mrs. Miller reached the brownstone house, snow was falling in a swift screen and foot tracks vanished as they were printed.

The white roses were arranged decoratively in the vase. The glazed cherries shone on a ceramic plate. The almond cakes, dusted with sugar, awaited a hand. The canary fluttered on its swing and picked at a bar of seed.

At precisely five the doorbell rang. Mrs. Miller knew who it was. The hem of her housecoat trailed as she crossed the floor. "Is that you?" she called.

"Naturally," said Miriam, the word resounding shrilly from the hall. "Open this door."

"Go away," said Mrs. Miller.

"Please hurry . . . I have a heavy package."

"Go away," said Mrs. Miller. She returned to the living room, lighted a cigarette, sat down and calmly listened to the buzzer; on and on and on. "You might as well leave. I have no intention of letting you in."

Shortly the bell stopped. For possibly ten minutes Mrs. Miller did not move. Then, hearing no sound, she concluded Miriam had gone. She tiptoed to the door and opened it a sliver; Miriam was half-reclining atop a cardboard box with a beautiful French doll cradled in her arms.

"Really, I thought you were

never coming," she said peevishly. "Here, help me get this in, it's awfully heavy."

It was not spell-like compulsion that Mrs. Miller felt, but rather a curious passivity; she brought in the box, Miriam the doll. Miriam curled up on the sofa, not troubling to remove her coat or beret, and watched disinterestedly as Mrs. Miller dropped the box and stood trembling, trying to catch her breath.

"Thank you," she said. In the daylight she looked pinched and drawn, her hair less luminous. The French doll she was loving wore an exquisite powdered wig and its idiot glass eyes sought solace in Miriam's. "I have a surprise," she continued. "Look into my box."

Kneeling, Mrs. Miller parted the flaps and lifted out another doll; then a blue dress which she recalled as the one Miriam had worn that first night at the theater; and of the remainder she said, "It's all clothes. Why?"

"Because I've come to live with you," said Miriam, twisting a cherry stem. "Wasn't it nice of you to buy me the cherries. . . ?"

"But you can't! For God's sake go away — go away and leave me alone!"

". . . and the roses and the almond cakes? How really wonderfully generous. You know, these cherries are delicious. The last place I lived was with an old man; he was terribly poor and we never had good things to eat. But I think I'll be happy here." She paused to snuggle her doll closer. "Now, if you'll just show me where to put my things. . . ."

Mrs. Miller's face dissolved into a mask of ugly red lines; she began to cry, and it was an unnatural, tearless sort of weeping, as though, not having wept for a long time, she had forgotten how. Carefully she edged backward till she touched the door.

She fumbled through the hall and down the stairs to a landing below. She pounded frantically on the door of the first apartment she came to; a short red-headed man answered and she pushed past him. "Say, what the hell is this?" he said. "Anything wrong, lover?" asked a young woman who appeared from the kitchen drying her hands. And it was to her that Mrs. Miller turned.

"Listen," she cried, "I'm ashamed behaving this way but — well, I'm Mrs. H. T. Miller and I live upstairs and . . ." She pressed her hands over her face. "It sounds so absurd. . . ."

The woman guided her to a chair, while the man excitedly rattled pocket change. "Yeah?"

"I live upstairs and there's a little girl visiting me, and I suppose that I'm afraid of her. She won't leave and I can't make her

and — she's going to do something terrible. She's already stolen my cameo, but she's about to do something worse — something terrible!"

The man asked, "Is she a relative, huh?"

Mrs. Miller shook her head. "I don't know who she is. Her name's Miriam, but I don't know for certain who she is."

"You gotta calm down, honey," said the woman, stroking Mrs. Miller's arm. "Harry here'll tend to this kid. Go on, lover." And Mrs. Miller said, "The door's open — 5A."

After the man left, the woman brought a towel and bathed Mrs. Miller's face. "You're very kind," Mrs. Miller said. "I'm sorry to act like such a fool, only this wicked child . . ."

"Sure, honey," consoled the woman. "Now, you better take it easy."

Mrs. Miller rested her head in the crook of her arm; she was quiet enough to be asleep. The woman turned a radio dial; a piano and a husky voice filled the silence, and the woman, tapping her foot, kept excellent time. "Maybe we oughta go up too," she said.

"I don't want to see her again. I don't want to be anywhere near her."

"Uh-huh, but what you shoulda done, you shoulda called a cop."

Presently they heard the man on the stairs. He strode into the room frowning and scratching the back of his neck, "Nobody there," he said, honestly embarrassed. "She musta beat it."

"Harry, you're a jerk," announced the woman. "We been sitting here the whole time and we woulda seen . . ." she stopped abruptly, for the man's glance was sharp.

"I looked all over," he said, "and there just ain't nobody there. Nobody, understand?"

"Tell me," said Mrs. Miller, rising, "tell me, did you see a large box? Or a doll?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't."

And the woman, as if delivering a verdict, said, "Well, for cryin-outloud . . ."

Mrs. Miller entered her apartment softly; she walked to the

center of the room and stood quite still. No, in a sense it had not changed; the roses, the cakes, and the cherries were in place. But this was an empty room, emptier than if the furnishings and familiars were not present, lifeless and petrified as in a funeral parlor. The sofa loomed before her with a new strangeness; its vacancy had a meaning that would have been less penetrating and terrible had Miriam been curled on it. She gazed fixedly at the space where she remembered setting the box, and, for a moment, the hassock spun desperately. And she looked through the window; surely the river was real, surely snow was falling — but then, one could not be certain witness to anything: Miriam, so vividly there — and yet, where was she? Where, where?

As though moving in a dream, she sank to a chair. The room was loosing shape; it was dark and getting darker and there was nothing to be done about it; she could not lift her hand to light a lamp.

Suddenly, closing her eyes, she felt an upward surge, like a diver emerging from some deeper, greener depth. In times of terror or immense distress, there are moments when the mind waits, as though for a revelation, while a skein of calm is woven over thought; it is like a sleep, or a supernatural trance; and during this lull one is aware of a force of quiet reasoning: well, what if she had never really known a girl named Miriam? that she had been foolishly frightened on the street? In the end, like everything else, it was of no importance. For the only thing she had lost to Miriam was her identity, but now she knew she had found again the person who lived in this room, who cooked her own meals, who owned a canary, who was someone she could trust and believe in: Mrs. H. T. Miller.

Listening in contentment, she became aware of a double sound: a bureau drawer opening and closing; she seemed to hear it long after completion — opening and closing. Then gradually the harshness of it was replaced by the murmur of a silk dress and this, delicately faint, was moving nearer and swelling in intensity till the walls trembled with the vibration and the room was caving under a wave of whispers. Mrs. Miller stiffened and opened her eyes to a dull, direct stare.

"Hello," said Miriam.

•

A MAN said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist!"
"However," replied the universe,
"The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation."

— Stephen Crane, *War Is Kind*

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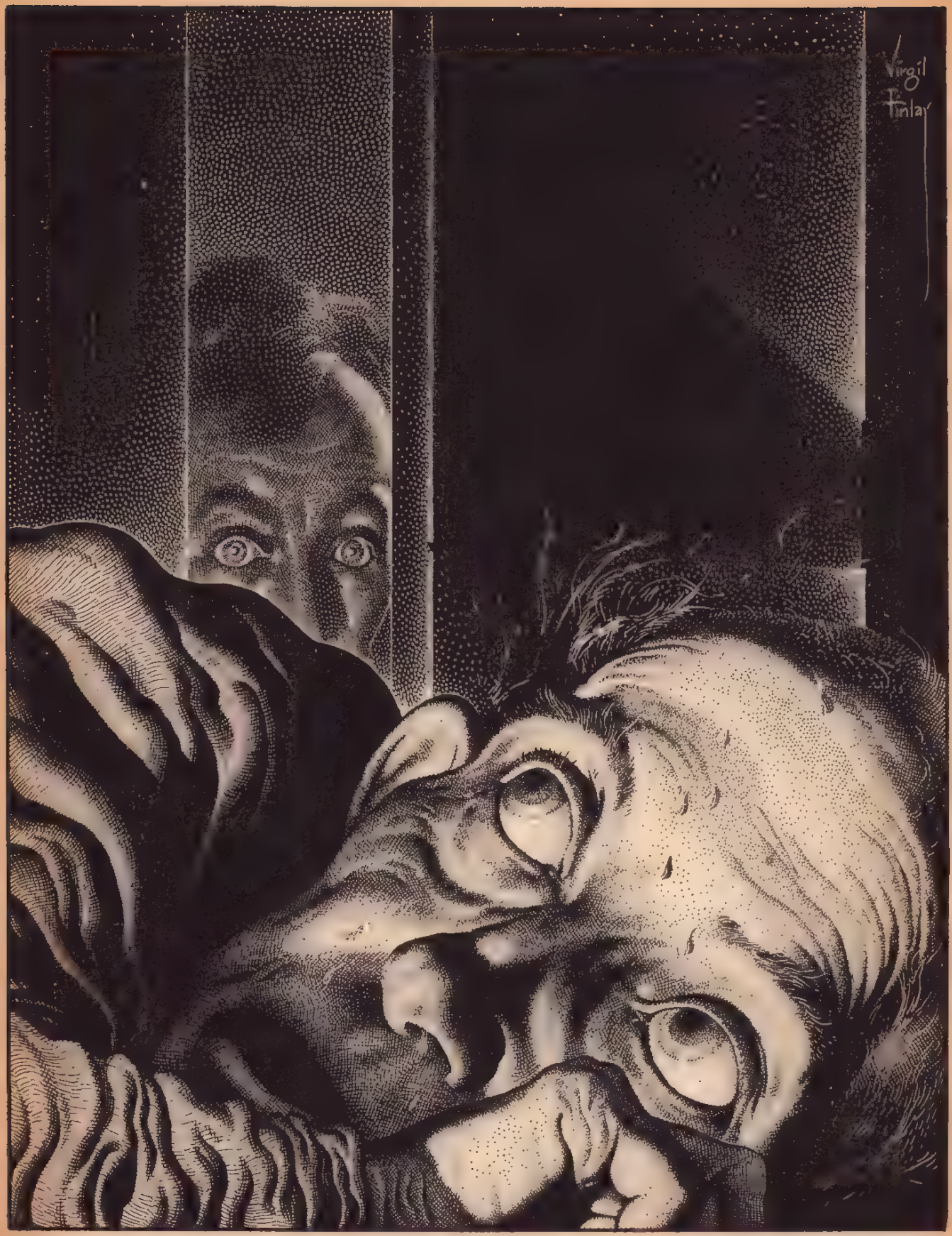
Virgil Finlay

Illustrator: Virgil Finlay

THE TELL-TALE HEART

By Edgar Allan Poe

It's unlikely that anyone has failed to read Edgar Allan Poe's masterpiece of madness: The Tell-Tale Heart. Then why include it here? Because, as the portrait of a madman, it has yet to be surpassed since the day it was written over a hundred years ago. It has served as inspiration for numerous short stories, radio and television plays; it has appeared in almost all the written languages, been reprinted in scores of anthologies.

Here, then, is a true classic of American letters, written by a tragic figure whose own life was as frustrating, as empty, as painful as that of any of the characters he put on paper.

TRUE! — nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses — not destroyed — not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily — how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but, once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eyes! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture, — a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees — very gradually — I made up

my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

Now this is the point, — you fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded — with what caution — with what foresight — with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it — oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly — very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! — would a madman have been so wise as this? And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously — oh, so cautiously — cautiously (for the hinges creaked) — I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights — every night just at midnight — but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than mine did. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers — of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts! I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me, for he moved on his bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you think that I drew back — but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers), and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang

up in the bed, crying out, "Who's there?"

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening, — just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall.

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief, — oh no! — it was the low, stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself, "It is nothing but the wind in the chimney — it is only a mouse crossing the floor," or "It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp." Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions; but he had found all in vain. All in vain; because Death, in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel — although he neither saw nor heard — to feel the presence of my head within the room.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little — a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it — you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily — until at length a single dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell upon the vulture eye.

It was open, — wide, wide open, — and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness, — all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person; for I had directed the ray, as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses? — now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.

But even yet I refrained and

kept still. I scarcely breathed, I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder, every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment! — do you mark me well? I have told you that I am nervous; so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me, — the sound would be heard by a neighbor! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once, — once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gayly to find the deed so far done. But for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

If you still think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three planks from the floorings of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye — not even his — could have detected anything wrong. There was nothing to wash out, — no stain of any kind, — no blood-spot what-ever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all — ha, ha!

When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock, — still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart, — for what had I now to fear? There entered three men who introduced themselves with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbor during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

I smiled — for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search — search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and, while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, erelong, I felt myself getting pale, and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears; but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct, — I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling, but it continued and gained definitiveness, — until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

No doubt I now grew very pale; but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased — and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound, — much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath — and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly — more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men; but the noise steadily increased. O God! what could I do? I foamed — I raved — I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! — no, no! They heard! they suspected! they knew! they were making a mockery of my horror! — this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! — and now — again! — hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!

"Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! — tear up the planks! — here, here! — it is the beating of his hideous heart!"

Angels in the Jets

(Continued from page 15)

Dodge's instincts jostled and shoved forward to point to one answer: that in the last analysis a man lived to live.

Maybe in ten years or so a rescue ship would come searching Messier 13 for them. But it would be an almost hopeless search. And it probably wouldn't even happen, for Investigation Teams were presumably self-sufficient, and when not heard from, presumably lost.

"Yes," he said. "I guess you're right, Chabot. If I take off, I die."

He pressed the airlock mechanism. The sliding-door whispered the rest of the way open. Dodge reached up and stripped off his oxy-mask — quickly, without giving himself time to think — and breathed deeply, once, twice, three-e-e-ee. . . .

He moved numbly to the rim of the lock, teetered there a moment on the edge of the world. His burning eyes caught the small mirror set into the wall over the first-aid cabinet; he saw his own face, looked through its eyes into the eyes of the mind he knew, and said, "Good-bye. . . ."

And even as he watched, they changed.

Soft tinkling melody from one of the houses touched his ears pleasantly. He turned, started down the metal rungs set into the side of the boat, thinking, *But I don't feel much different!* He stopped on the way to reach over and help Jones out of the proton-cannon. Together, they jumped the short distance to the ground.

The crowd, now that the problem of the lunatic in its midst had been solved, had lost interest. They walked away, singly and in groups, chattering and smiling. Jones smiled and walked away too, clutching his broken arm. Dodge noticed with a start that Jones had two other arms — the broken arm and two others with which he clutched it. It was Jones, without doubt. But it was very strange that Dodge had never noticed those three arms before. Well, no matter . . .

Marian came out from under the stern of the crewboat, her eyes shining. Dodge wondered again if she knew him. She started to walk past him, hips swaying provocatively. He reached out and took her shoulder, bruising the flesh hard. Suddenly she was in his arms, flowing up against him.

"I like you too," she was saying hoarsely, raggedly. "I like you too."

They joined hands and began to walk. Marian, probably remembering the hopping woman, began to hop too, and soon it turned into a dance. Dodge joined in, laughing happily.

He bent over once, walking on all fours, just as they were entering the forest, so he could look back under the crewboat and see the dancing, darting figures of the angels in the jets.

I'm Looking for Jeff

(Continued from page 27)

"Really?" the redhead asked.

Pops nodded. "Sure thing. Know who really did it? They found out."

"Who?" the cute little brunette prompted.

"The same guy that got the glass in his face," Pops announced triumphantly. "This Jeff Cooper fellow. Seems he was some sort of a racketeer. Got to know this Bobby in Michigan City. They had a fight up there, don't know what, guess maybe she was two-timing him. Anyway, she thought he was over being mad, and he let her think so. He brought her down to Chicago, took her to this apartment he had, and beat her to death."

"That's right," the old man affirmed, rubbing it in when the cute little brunette winced. "Beat her to death with a beer bottle."

The redhead inquired curiously, "Did she ever come here, Pops? Did you ever see her?"

For a moment the glass in Pops' towel stopped twirling. Then he pursed his lips. "Nope," he said emphatically, "I couldn't have. 'Cause he murdered her the night he brought her down to Chicago. And that was a week before they found her." He chuckled. "A few days more and it would have been the sanitary inspectors who discovered the body — or the garbage man."

He leaned forward, smiling, waiting until the cute brunette had lifted her unwilling fascinated eyes. "Incidentally, that's why they couldn't pin it on this Martin Bellows kid. A week before — at the time she was killed — he was hundreds of miles away."

He twirled the gleaming glass. He noticed that the cute brunette was still intently watching him. "Yep," he said reflectively, "it was quite a job that other guy did on her. Beat her to death with a beer bottle. Broke the bottle doing it. One of the last swipes he gave her laid her face open all the way from her left temple to her right ear."

Hyacinth Peuch

(Continued from page 45)

no light." He pondered a little while, ended, "Well, we have seen the last of this vampire. Chateauverne will be troubled no more."

"I am not so sanguine, Monsieur," offered Jean-Pierre. "In Chateauverne, if one is not being strangled or used for bouillon, another is being robbed of forty francs, or another is fastened to his throne like a hairy and impotent emperor." He reached for a bottle. "You will have a cognac, perhaps?"

"But certainly."

The remainder has yet to be told, may never be told. A living speck came from the far reaches of space, took root near Chateauverne. Being phototropic, it posed by day like one hypnotized, but by night it grew and moved and drank blood and grew again until it was destroyed.

Hyacinth Peuch, being simple, got no credit whatsoever. Indeed, he was severely criticized for holding his tongue so long, despite the fact that none would have taken note if he had permitted it to wag.

Even an idiot can be sensitive, which is why he continued to invite no insults the following Spring. Returning from a certain secluded spot where with the aid of adequate if cross-eyed sight he sometimes gained instruction in the twin arts of courtship and conquest, he saw a hairy chestnut inching across his path.

It was a small, brown, shiny thing with trembling cilia. Moving slowly, laboriously, it got over the path, across the grass verge, tumbled helplessly down one side of a ditch, climbed up the other, settled itself into the swell of the bank. There, with cilia feebly waving, it buried itself from sight.

At odd times months apart he came back to this spot, but the bank spurted new growths lavishly, and there was no way of telling the native from the alien. The end of October arrived before he noticed one day under a meter-high shrub a dead mouse, twisted, wrinkled and dry.

Chateauverne received fair warning in the form of two words spoken to the Widow Martin.

"Rain soon." He chuckled with sloppy gobbling sounds, ogling her sidewise and swinging a drip from his nose.

Now the Widow Martin — being a healthy, vigorous woman conscious of her solitary state — was quietly and innocently enjoying her own desires. To her, the unappetizing spectacle of Hyacinth was as welcome as that of a dead rat at a banquet.

So she growled, "Go away, oaf!" and fidgeted her hungry backside and forgot him.

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